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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MURDER MOST FAIR

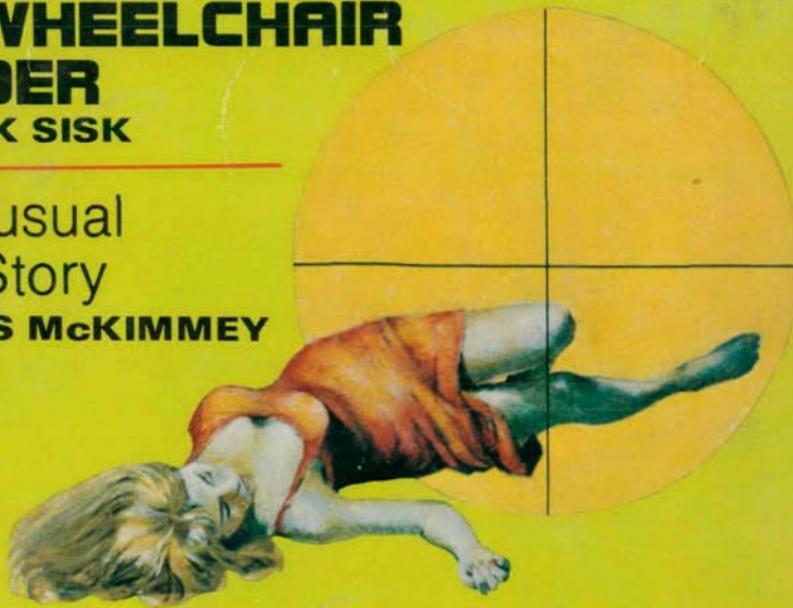
A MIKE SHAYNE short novel
by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE WHEELCHAIR MURDER

by FRANK SISK

An Unusual Short Story

by JAMES McKIMMEEY



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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JULY, 1976
VOL. 39, NO. 1

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

MURDER MOST FAIR

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Kidnapping a screen star of the magnitude of a Katherine Leith is rather like kidnapping a whale—once you have her, what can you do with her? But the actress is missing and it is up to the redhead to rescue her. In the course of his investigation, Shayne uncovers a simmering feud between criminal elements ready to erupt in a volcano of violence. 2 to 48

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MURDER MOST FAIR

by BRETT HALLIDAY

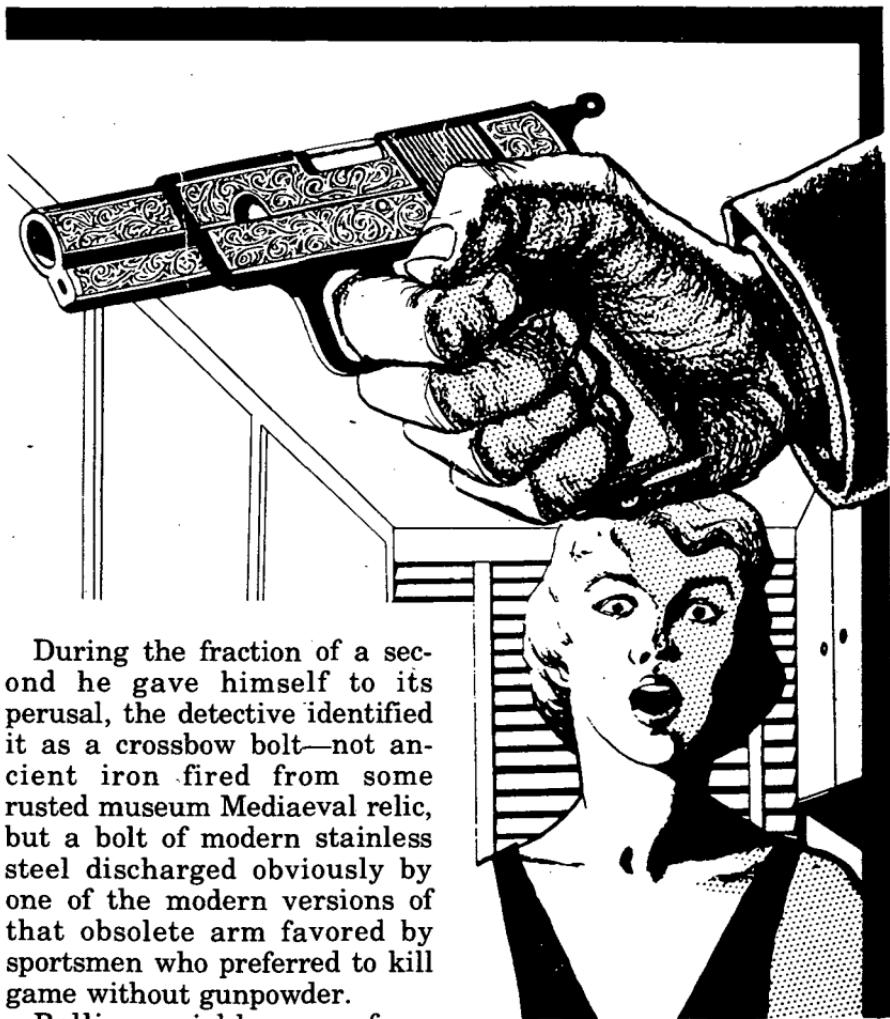
When Katherine Leith vanished while on location in Miami, it was the redhead's job to get her out of it before her kidnappers got either or both of them.

OVER THE YEARS, the single factor Shayne believed to have contributed most to his survival was his refusal to be surprised by the unexpected. In any given situation, however bland or threatening, he had developed the habit of being psychologically prepared for any and every possibility. Over and again, this talent for swift and supple reaction to the unexpected, however outrageous or unlikely, had pulled him through difficult crises that must inevitably have been damaging or even fatal to any man not so prepared.

But the steel dart that whirred past his right ear to imbed itself in the wooden wall of the duck blind in which he lay concealed was an element for which he was totally unready.

For one thing, it came from behind him, from the isolated shack on the edge of the Everglades that he was suppose to be protecting. For another, its discharge had been neither announced nor followed by the sound of even a silenced weapon. The third factor that caught him completely offguard was the nature of the missile itself.

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During the fraction of a second he gave himself to its perusal, the detective identified it as a crossbow bolt—not ancient iron fired from some rusted museum Mediaeval relic, but a bolt of modern stainless steel discharged obviously by one of the modern versions of that obsolete arm favored by sportsmen who preferred to kill game without gunpowder.

Rolling quickly away from his suddenly vulnerable cover, Shayne discovered in the first faint light of day that the blind offered little shelter from the rear. Nor was his sense of exposure lessened by sight of the slim youthful figure that stood in the door of the shack, obvi-

ously preparing to send a second steel bolt whizzing his way.

The familiar husky contralto that floated to him was crisply definite—"Put your hands behind your neck and come forward, slowly."

At least, Shayne thought as he rose slowly, carefully, to his feet, it was the unmistakable voice of the woman he had been hired to protect—Katherine Leith, the screen and stage star of world stature. Had it been anyone else he was guarding during the uncomfortable hours since midnight, his faith in his ability to be prepared for the unexpected might have been totally wiped out.

As it was, he felt like a double damned fool.

She stopped him when he was ten feet away, the reloaded crossbow aimed unflinchingly at his navel. From this distance, even in the dim light, he was able to get his first good look at his reluctant client.

Save for the tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, she still retained the youthful appeal that had won her millions of fans a good quarter of a century earlier. She was smaller than he had supposed her to be, but the body supporting her arrestingly beautiful copper-fringed head, if not outstanding in feminine curves, wore the lissom resilience that bespoke lifelong discipline and exercise.

Artemis rather than Aphrodite. Diana rather than Venus.

"Now," she said, "remove the pistol from your belt—very carefully—and toss it on the ground." Only when he had

obeyed, did she say, "Who in hell are you, anyway?"

"I'm Mike Shayne, private operative. I've been hired to protect you."

"I presume you have identification," and, at his nod, "Toss it over."

He did so. She did a quick knee bend to scoop it up, keeping him covered, managed to scan his permit with badge attached without letting the crossbow waver.

"Very well, Mike Shayne," she said in that unmistakable, slightly metallic contralto. "Two questions. Who hired you to protect me?"

"Margot Lansing."

"Margot . . ." A faint smile revealed the familiar suppleness of the wide, slashing mouth. "She thinks women are born to be protected." A pause, then, "And whom are you supposed to be protecting me from?"

"She told me about the two previous attempts on your life, Miss Leith."

Katherine Leith dismissed this information with a scornful gesture of her left hand. "Accidents!" she said.

From the description Margot Lansing and given him, Shayne did not believe two such near-accidents likely. The first had come forty hours earlier, when the two women emerged from

the rear exit of the de luxe condominium on top of which the Lansings lived. As the actress stepped off the sidewalk, a car parked fifty feet away at the curb had accelerated with a velocity which suggested it had been waiting, motor running, for opportunity to run Katherine Leith down.

Only the actress's extraordinarily quick reflexes had enabled her to avoid it by an eyelash.

The second had occurred late in the morning of the previous day when Katherine Leith went alone onto the terrace of her hostess's apartment, overlooking the Bay, to be greeted by a bullet that again had come uncomfortably close to hitting its target.

Shayne must have looked his disbelief because Katherine Leith regarded him coolly for a long silent moment, then said, "You don't believe the attempts were accidents?"

"Do you?" the detective countered. Then, when she did not reply, "Coming so close, and so close together, I'd say they were highly suspect."

"Mr. Shayne," she said, "contrary to what you seem to believe, I am not a complete idiot. Of course, I don't think they were accidents. If I did, do you think I'd have brought *this* out here?"

She indicated the steel crossbow, then lowered it, unloaded it and began folding it up until it resembled a collapsible fishing rod rather than a weapon intended for landgoing targets.

Nodding toward the sand at her feet, she added, "You might as well pick up your gun and badge, Mr. Private Detective, and run along back where you came from. I shall inform Margot that I neither need nor want your services. I feel quite capable of taking care of myself, thank you."

There was nothing for Shayne to do but comply. He had been caught, assayed and dismissed. All in all, a most humiliating experience. By the time he recovered his gear, the actress had turned her back on him and was reentering the shack. She closed the door behind her with unmistakable finality.

Feeling more the idiot than ever, the redhead trudged disconsolately back over the sedge-grown path and turned into the foliage-encircled impromptu parking place to reclaim his car. He wondered how she had spotted him so quickly, was happy on the whole that he had not asked.

The reply would, in all probability, merely add to his embarrassment.

Shayne was so wrapped up in his own sense of futility that he all but missed noting the stub of a cigarillo in the dirt six feet back of his Buick. As it was, he glowered at it for a long moment before noting that, though it lay in one of his own tire tracks, it showed no sign of being flattened by the weight of the heavy vehicle that must have passed directly over it unless . . .

. . . unless it had been dropped there *after* he left the vehicle for his vigil in the duck blind.

He scowled at it, tugging at his left earlobe as he sought to work it out. The blind lay close enough to the parking place for him to have heard the arrival and departure of any other car during the early morning hours, under ordinary conditions.

Since he had not heard one, it meant either that the smoker of the brown cigarillo had walked some distance or had taken extraordinary care that his vehicle should not be heard. Shayne scanned the ground closely behind the Buick, seeking traces, found them. Further back, his own tire tracks had been diagonally crossed by the tires of another.

Shayne felt the familiar stir of warning at the nape of his neck, the instinctive reaction to

danger unseen and unheard that he had learned by experience to believe in utterly. Without it, he would have ceased to live years earlier.

Cautiously, he got down on his hands and knees to examine the rear end of the Buick. It did not appear to have been tampered with. Sighing, he rose, dusted off his slacks, approached the radiator hood, lifted it with great caution.

The bomb was there, wired to his carburetor. The moment he stepped on the starter and the well tuned motor came on, he would have been scattered all over the landscape.

He stood there, trying to make up his mind. He was no demolition expert and, if he tried to disconnect it himself, he might still wind up as shredded meat. On the other hand, if he called on the Miami Police Bomb Squad for help, his friends and foes on the Force would inevitably learn of his discomfiture at the hands of the screen star.

He was standing there, nervously himself up to make the call for help, when a newly familiar voice behind him said, "Engine trouble, Mr. Detective Shayne?"

"Of a sort," he replied, stepping aside to let her look.

She was standing alongside the most remarkable bicycle he had ever seen outside of a

clown act at the circus, the difference being tha this bike was not meant to be funny.

It was a man's cycle of glittering light-metal alloy, with a battery of levers on a bank attached to the handlebars that indicated a multiplicity of gears. Its chain was a ribbon of metal mesh that was, he judged, jam-proof and its brake was of a type he had never set eyes on before.

The film star still wore the brown slacks and rumpled dark green shirt in which she had greeted him at the shack door. Her only adornment was the crossbow, which she bore slung by a strap across her back. It still looked more like a collapsible fishing rod that what it was. On her feet were scuffed white tennis shoes, the "sneakers" of his own youth.

With a toss of her tousled copper curls. She looked at the bomb for a moment, frowning, then turned to the bike, braced it upright and bent over the steering bar. So swiftly and efficiently did she move that, before Shayne realized what she was up to, she had extracted a wrench and a screwdriver from its small toolkit and was bending over the carburetor of the Buick.

With a cry of alarm, Shayne stepped forward to pull her away. Without turning her

head, she said, "Do you want to get us both blown to smithereens, you damned fool?"

To the best of his remembrance later, his reply was a medium-loud grunt.

He could only stand there, holding his breath while, employing a minimum of waste motion and maximum efficiency, she disarmed the lethal device with the practiced skill of a jeweler extracting a precious stone from its setting. The job complete, she returned the tools to their compact steering pole kit, placed the bomb in one of a pair of what looked like fine and very genuine leather saddlebags on either side of the upholstered seat.

"Hey, Miss *Leith!*" he said. "You shouldn't do that. Hit a bump and—"

She withered him with a glance, said, "It's perfectly harmless unless it's detonated. And now it has no detonator."

"Why do you want it?" he asked. "It should go to the police."

"Perhaps, in time," she said coolly. "There's someone else I want to show it to first."

"Miss Leith . . ." he said.

"Call me Kate," she replied. "Everyone does."

"Okay, but where in hell did you learn to defuse a bomb like that?"

Another tossback of the cop-

per curls, then. "There were a lot of bombs in a movie I made just after World War Two. We had a British demolition crew the R.A.F. lent us. I got curious about their work, and they taught me."

"My God!" His cry was honest wonderment.

"Mr. Shayne," she said, "how did you catch onto the fact this one was there?"

He told her about the cigarillo and his deductions therefrom. She listened, then said, "Well, I guess you *are* a detective, all right, Mr. Shayne. That sounds so formal if you call me Kate."

"I haven't—yet," he replied.

"You will. Everybody does. What's your first name—Mike, isn't it?"

"Most people call me Shayne."

"I hate Mike—it sounds like a small dog's bark. I shall call you Michael. I think it's a beautiful name. Got a cigaret, Michael?"

As he handed her one, Shayne realized that, if she learned about her calling him Michael, Lucy Hamilton would never believe that he had not given her Lucy's own private name for him. They leaned against the car and smoked and the detective realized that her vibrations had changed from suspicion and distrust into

warmth with high overtones of companionship.

Evidently, the incident of the bomb had reversed the unfavorable vibrations of the crossbow incident.

With a sidelong glance upward at his face, she said, "Michael, do you begin to think I can take care of myself?"

"No comment," he replied. Then pointing at the bicycle with his cigaret. "I suppose that's Wheeler the Second."

She shook her head. "That's Wheeler the First, the one and only. Leonard Shawcroft made it to my private specifications in London four years ago. It was stolen when my Brentwood house was robbed while I was on location in Denmark."

"You're sure of that?"

The look he received from the actress was well below freezing point. She said, "Mr. Shayne, I never make a statement I cannot prove. You are quite free to call Leonard Shawcroft yourself if you wish. He's listed in the London directory."

"I'll take your word for it, Kate." It was the closest he could come to an apology. "How the hell do you suppose it turned up here—in Jack's Outlet Emporium?"

"That is something I am making it my business to find out, Michael." She dropped her cigaret butt to the ground,

stepped on it carefully to make sure it was extinguished. Then she said, "Give my regards to Margot when you call her."

"I shall—and thanks for what you did with the bomb," the detective told her, "Just be careful with it for your own sake."

"Dammit, Michael, stop fathering me!" She readied the bike for departure.

"Are you spending tonight in the shack, Kate?"

"Do you know any reason why I shouldn't?" she countered. "Especially with you there to protect me."

She swung her left leg over the bar gracefully and was off, bending low over the dropped handlebars like a racing rider. Shayne looked long after her before lowering the hood and getting behind the wheel of the Buick. He was quite sure she would not take kindly to his following her too closely.

Jesus! he thought. What a woman!

II

MARGOT LANSING, plump, still pretty and a former roommate of the actress at the Connecticut finishing school both women attended as teenage girls, had been close to tears when Shayne answered her call to discuss the attempts on the film star's life.



"She absolutely *refused* to call in the police," she said. "Claimed it would interfere with her preparation for the film she's going to star in around Miami. Harry tried his best, but she just wouldn't. Then she went out to this ducker's cabin to be alone and study her part. Said she could take care of herself, thank you, and thanks for a lovely visit but, 'I have to be alone, loves.'"

"It sounds rather like the old Garbo bit," Shayne remarked. "The police won't like your not reporting the incidents."

"When Kate says no, you don't—you just don't," the plump lady told him. "It's hard to explain, but you *just don't*. Mr. Shayne, I couldn't bear it if anything should happen to her while she's visiting me. You've got to protect her."

"From what?" The detective asked "Do you have reason to believe somebody *is* out to get her?"

"Yes—no—I don't know. I mean, why would anyone want to harm *Kate*? Still, with all the crazy people around today doing crazy things, we can't be too careful."

The redheaded detective found this answer far from satisfactory, but he let it ride. He tried to tell himself that he was about to accept the assignment because his secretary

and good friend of many years' standing, Lucy Hamilton, was an avid Katherine Leith fan and would never forgive him for passing up such a chance to be near her idol.

But, beneath this camouflage, he knew better. He was a Leith fan himself . . .

He questioned Margot Lansing further as to possible motives for the apparent attempts at murder, but that plump pretty lady either could not or would not give him any information on that score. All she indicated was that her famous guest's attitude had changed shortly after her arrival.

"Changed—in what way. Mrs. Lansing?" Shayne asked.

"She seemed to withdraw into herself—it was right after I gave her the bicycle. But Kate was always given to sudden changes of mood—introspective. I remember once, when we were seniors at school, she . . ."

The detective let her ramble on, waiting for a break in the inevitable anecdote. When it came, he said, "You say it happened after you gave her a bicycle? What bicycle?"

"Oh, I found this perfect beauty at Jack's Outlet Emporium. Kate's a fiend about exercise and loves to cycle—for miles and miles." Pause for a brief shudder, then, "She's famous for cycling all over the Hol-

lywood Hills and Malibu, and when I saw it, I thought she might like it to get around Miami even if the country's flat."

"She didn't like it?" the detective asked.

"She loved it—that wasn't the problem. I got it for her because it looked exactly like the bike she used to run around with when I visited her two years ago in California. It was some sort of special English model with all sorts of extra custom gadgets. You wouldn't believe what it cost."

Having some knowledge of the prices at Jack's Outlet Emporium on the Beach Boulevard, Shayne didn't doubt the expense. He said, "How did her attitude change, Mrs. Lansing?"

"She said, 'Darling, you've found Wheeler—she gives everything she likes pet names. Where?'"

"I told her and she got that funny far-away look of hers and I knew she was off on something. Then she came out of it and thanked me again and nothing more was said that day. We went to a party that night with some of the people she's making the film with—impossible types, though this Stanley Kronkheit, the director, seems rather nice."

"She was gone all the next



day—she rode off on Wheeler early that morning and didn't get back until late afternoon. She didn't say where she was except that it was business. It was the day after that—the things—started happening."

"Just what do you want me to do, Mrs. Lansing?" the detective asked.

It was to be mainly a night job—guarding the actress in the ducker's shack she had selected for seclusion while she plunged into her usual intensive preparation for a part, something she always did in complete solitude before beginning actual rehearsals and shooting for a picture.

As Shayne's employer said, "During the day, of course, she'll be in a crowd. But once she goes home to that God-forsaken shack, she'll be absolutely unprotected."

The arrangement was made. Beginning that evening—last evening—the redheaded detective had undertaken his nocturnal vigil. He was to maintain it, unknown to his client if at all possible, until her departure by day. For two-and-a-half bills per diem, the job to endure until Katherine Leith departed the shack. Plus expenses, of course.

The retainer was for a thousand dollars, non-returnable, of course.

Lucy was impressed as Shayne had known she would be. "Talk about the luck of the Irish!" she said, her lovely eyes aglow with excitement. Then, in quick mood-reversals, "But I'm going to worry a lot."

"Why? I think I can take care of it okay."

"I'm not worried about the job," said Lucy. "I'm worried about Kate Leith and you—out there alone together every night."

Shayne had ruffled her trimly cut dark hair, said, "Why is it that every woman thinks her man is irresistible to other women? Listen, *la* Leith has her pick of the world from what I hear."

"Just watch your step, Michael—that's all I ask." Then, melting, "You lucky dog—and getting paid for it, too!"

Shayne had driven out to the ducker's shack after leaving the office and thoroughly scouted the territory. It was then that he determined to use the blind fifty yards in front of the shack as his sentry box. He had located a suitable turnaround in which to park his Buick unseen amid the surrounding scrub.

Then he had called Tim Rourke on the car phone and met him in their regular rendezvous spot, The Beef House on Miami Avenue. There, enjoying a double Martell on the rocks, he said, "Tim, what do you know about a couple named Lansing, if anything—first names Margot and Harry?"

The veteran reporter's shaggy eyebrows rose as he put down his boilermaker. He said, "What's to know about them—except that he's supposed to be rich and they've had Katherine Leith visiting them?"

"Hey, I'm asking you."

"All I know is, the feature boys and columnists have been going bananas trying to interview her. So far, they've scored exactly zilch. *La* Leith, apparently, is opposed to personal publicity and knows how to avoid it."

"Tough as her legend," Shayne remarked.

"Tougher. Mike, if you can rig me an interview, it would wipe out that ninety-proof bout

with the flue I had two weeks ago and allow me another snake-bite furlough."

The detective shook his head. "I haven't met the lady yet—as a matter of fact, I'm not supposed to."

"Then what in hell is this all about—or would you mind telling me?" the reporter begged. "Ever since I got dried out, the old man's been looking at me across the city desk as if he's going to put me on writing obits—preferably my own."

"Tough," said Shayne. "But if it's common knowledge she's staying with the Lansings, your boys and gals must have looked into them. See what you can find out about *them*, and I'll do my best for you if opportunity rears its lovely head."

"Fair enough, Mike, but . . ." His eagerness faded before the steely expression in the detective's grey eyes, and he did not continue his plea.

The redhead simply did not dare reveal either the nature of his assignment or the fact that Margot Lansing was convinced that two apparent attempts had recently been made on her old schoolmate's life. Rourke might be his closest friend and preferred drinking companion, as well as his most valued source of information, but he was a reporter and a good one—and the story was simply too hot to

trust him with, especially at a time when he was in the doghouse with his editor.

His motive in asking for information on the Lansings was more obscure. It was based on the ambivalence of Margot Lansing's reply to his query as to whether she had reason to believe anyone might be out to destroy the famed film star. He suspected that Margot Lansing *did* have reason—else why would she have hired *him*?—but did not feel free to reveal it even in confidence.

It was an ambivalence that bothered the redhead. He wanted to know why, intended to find out, if not through the newsman then via some other source.

There was unusual constraint between the two old friends as they dined—constraint that in no way impaired Shayne's appetite as he dug into his blood-rare charcoaled top sirloin with all the usual trimmings, but which seemed to abate the cadaverous reporter's usually wolflike hunger.

Pushing a massive platter of shortribs away half-eaten, Rourke said, "If a man won't trust his friends . . ."

He let it hang. The detective pretended not to notice—after all, he and Rourke had been this route many times before. But after signing the check, he

could not resist dropping a third shoe with, "By the way, Tim—you might ask your film people at the *News* how and when Wheeler was lost."

"How and when *Wheeler* was lost?" Rourke repeated.

"Since when has there been an echo in here?" Shayne got to his feet, plucked his soft-brimmed fedora from its hook at the end of the booth, pulled it to its accustomed jaunty angle, said, "So long, Tim—see what you can do like a good little newsman."

The bewilderment and anger battling in Rourke's usually impassive face were well worth the cost of the meal the detective had just footed . . .

He drove directly out of the city following the older roads and reaching the parking place shortly after ten-thirty. The moon was low and a half-dozen other cars were parked there, the occupants taking advantage of the darkness. Shayne pulled his Buick into the well covered place he had selected that afternoon. He turned off the lights, lowered the windows halfway, put the radio on the police band and waited.

Dirty chess in Lover's Lane, he thought. The fact that he was there, alone, and listening to police calls was bound to make some of the amorists in the other vehicles uncomforta-

ble. Even in his own youth, he remembered, the chief fear of nocturnal parkers was of having the merciless glare of an official flashlight or spotlight expose them in a moment of intimacy.

People simply don't make bedrooms of their cars if they have other beds to share. Cars are too damned uncomfortable. Unless some of these were parked for some other purpose than making love. This was what the detective sought to sort out.

Within half an hour, all the other vehicles had pulled out, one by one.

There was one near-incident when a sullen looking long-haired youth had loomed up in the detective's right front window and said angrily, "Why in hell don't you go bothering people somewhere else? Are you some kind of a nut or something? Buzz off."

Shayne, who had picked up his car telephone as the youth approached him, said, "Hold it, lieutenant—we've got interference at this end." Hanging up, he had turned to face the visitor, letting his jacket fall back to reveal the grip of his forty-five protruding from its belt holster in a shaft of light from one of the other vehicles.

"Yes?" he asked, his voice very soft.

"Sorry, sir, I didn't mean—I mean I didn't know. I only thought . . ." As his words tailed off, so did he. A car door slammed and then he was gone, pulling out of the parking space in an angry spurt of gravel and stones.

Left alone, Shayne had moved his car further into seclusion and cut all switches. He was sheltered from aerial observation by a palmetto tree and could hardly be seen by anyone walking or driving along the bumpy swamp lane that led to the parking place.

It was forty-two minutes by the luminous dial on his wristwatch before another car halted in the clearing with motor running. There were voices and then the unmistakable contralto of Katherine Leith saying, "I'm quite all right, my darlings. I'll take it alone from here. I'll see you tomorrow at the hotel, Stan dear."

There was a deep male grumble, followed by Katherine Leith's silvery laugh, then, "You're treating me like some frail and fainting Victorian damsel, my love. You should know me better by this time."

The deep voice replied, "Chis-sakes, Kate, the backers we got, you ought to stay buttoned down tight. No telling what hell may pop. No way, Never have taken it on if it wasn't for

you, Kate. Put yourself out on a limb staying here."

Another feminine voice said, "He's right, you know. Without you, there's no picture."

The silvery laugh sound, this time freighted with a tinge of mockery. "Don't worry, my friends. I have my own protection. And now I'm going to turn in and try to deflate my ego after all this boo."

"Don't like it, Kate," the male repeated. "Least let Edie stay with you."

"No, darlings. By this time you should both know me well enough to understand that when I sleep alone, I sleep alone."

"Hope to hell it works out that way."

Then a car door slammed and, after hallooed good nights, the car backed for a turnaround and returned as it had come. Through a gap in the scrub amidst which he was parked, the detective watched a slim, almost boyish, female figure walk the hundred yards of path that led to the slight hummock on which the ducker shack stood in the pale moonlight.

He saw her enter it, saw a dim light go on inside, then the rectangle of the open door was closed. His charge was home for the night. The redhead decided it would be smarter to go to the blind while the film star was

moving about, preparing to bed down for the night or whatever, than to make his move after she was in silence. He did not want her to hear him taking up his sentry duty and this was a night in which not even an owl hooted or a frog *chugarummed*.

It was twelve twenty-seven when he settled uncomfortably on the car blanket he had brought with him to alleviate the hardness of the board bottom of the blind. Luckily, the water of the great swamp was seasonally low, so he did not have dampness to contend with.

He had selected the blind in preference to his parking place in the local Lover's Lane because, in the blind, he commanded a view of the swamp road in both directions—whereas, under the trees, he could not even command it one way.

There he had remained, fighting sleep as the early morning hours wore slowly on with various devices. Only the drone of an occasional plane coming in or out of Miami Airport, far to the east and south, broke the night's silence.

Twice, he heard the *cup-cup-cup* of a helicopter and snapped to attention in anticipation of he knew not what—but each time the sound faded before he could even spot the aircraft's lights. All in all, Shayne de-

cided, his supposedly glamorous assignment was turning out to be one of the dullest milk runs he had ever undertaken.

With the break of dawn, he decided to return to the car where he could at least observe the shack until his charge left for work and he could regain touch with the world via the car telephone. Despite the blanket and the warmth of the night, Shayne's joints felt stiff and sore as he stretched his limbs, preparing to leave the blind.

That was when the crossbow bolt smacked into the imprompty sentry box after whirring less than an inch from his left ear . . .

III

SHAYNE'S THOUGHTS turned to other facets of the case as he backed out of the parking place and headed for town. He tried to put what he knew in chronological order, hoping to find some sort of comprehensible pattern . . .

Kate Leith comes to Miami to prepare for a film about to be shot on location in Dade County. She visits an old schoolfriend, Margot Langing. Margot, anxious to please her guest, purchases either Wheeler or a replica of Wheeler in Jack's Outlet Emporium. Kate's

attitude changes the moment she sees it.

She, in her own words, makes it her "business to find out" how and why the stolen bike (if it was the original, and Shayne was inclined to go along with the actress on that) had turned up in Miami Beach so long after the Brentwood robbery. Then follow the two near-miss attempts on her life and her retirement to the ducker's shack on the edge of the great swamp.

Fearful for her guest's safety, Margot hires Shayne to be Kate's night watchman—and right there the whole scenario runs off the track. Instead of Kate being threatened, it is her bodyguard who comes close to sudden extinction via the car-bomb route.

There had to be a reason, but for the life of him, the redhead could not figure it out. He determined to go to work on it as soon as he got back to town.

Afterthought—why had the actress pretended to shrug off the first two assassination attempts as mere "accidents"—and why had she taken the bomb away with her after defuzing it? Perhaps even more important, to whom was she taking it?

At that moment, the problems seemed as knotted as his forehead while tabulating them.



While still in the city's outskirts, Shayne spotted a brick and timber restaurant that, by the number of cars in the lot, was open for breakfast. At that moment, he discovered that he was ravenously hungry after his long night's vigil in the duck blind.

Seated in a booth, he pondered the case futher while surfeiting the inner man with a large bowl of excellent chile con carne, steaming hot of temperature and flavor alike, accompanied by a rapidly dwindling hillock of soda crackers and a beaker of milk—an unusual

breakfast for Shayne but one that eminently suited his appetite at the moment.

When he paid the cashier's check, the wall clock behind her read seven twenty-three—much too early to start the day's work. He yawned as he started the car, decided to go home to his worn but comfortable residential hotel apartment and grab a couple of hours' sleep. Before turning in, he took his phone off the hook and set the alarm for ten o'clock.

He woke up feeling drugged by the shortness of his slumber, but a cold shower restored him to life. Dressed, he dialled his office.

"I was beginning to worry about you, Michael," Lucy told him. "How'd it go last night?"

"Dullsville," he replied—why worry Lucy? "What's up?"

"Mrs. Lansing's been trying to get you ever since I came in at nine."

"So, Angel?"

"She sounds excited—and worried. She's anxious to talk to you right away."

"Okay, I'll call her," the detective replied. "Anything else?"

"Nothing important. Are you coming in?"

"After I talk to Margot Lansing, Angel. Hold the fort till then."

"I'll try—but I'm dying to

hear about *la* Leith. Did you meet her, Michael?"

"I did."

"What's she like?"

"Kate's quite a woman," he told her. "I'll tell you about it when I get in. Bye."

Smiling a faint smile that verged on the sadistic, he left Lucy hanging and dialed his client. The tone of her well bred voice wiped the smirk from his face. Tension, worry, even fear, lurked close to the surface, ready to erupt.

"What's happened?" he asked her.

"Was Kate all right when you left her this morning?"

"She seemed fine—and I didn't leave her, she left me. Is something wrong?"

"I don't know yet, Mr. Shayne. And I can't tell you over the phone. How soon can you get here?"

"Ten minutes. I'm on my way."

He made the condominium in nine, took three more getting to the high, terraced condominium. Margot Lansing looked appealing but distraught in a flowered quilted breakfast robe with a night-net over her neatly curled brown hair.

She gripped his big muscular hands in both of her plump little ones, said, "My God, I'm glad you're here."

"What's happened?" He re-

peated the question as she drew him onto a glassed-in portion of the terrace that served as a breakfast room.

A round-faced little man, who managed not to look dapper in a nail-head sharkskin suit the detective judged to have cost at least three hundred dollars, rose to greet him. He could not have been more than five feet four and his pink mouth and bright blue eyes radiated charm and anxiety that appeared to match his wife's.

"Glad to meet you, sir," he said, offering a small nicely manicured hand. "I'm Harry Lansing." A pause, then in a soft well modulated voice, "Margot is very upset about Kate—and I'm afraid with cause."

"Suppose you tell me." The detective took a proffered chair and looked at his client.

"You were watching the shack this morning?" Margot Lansing asked, biting her lower lip.

"I saw her off early, about six-thirty, riding her bike to town. She was okay then."

The Lansing's exchanged a long look, then Mr. Lansing said. "My wife—Margot—got a telephone call shortly after eight. A man's voice—a stranger. He said they had Kate and that we were to wait for further instructions and

above all not to call in the police."

"Is that right?" Shayne looked at the distraught woman. She nodded.

"How do you know it wasn't hoax?"

"Because Kate came on," said Margot Lansing. "She said, I'm all right and don't worry. The bomb hasn't exploded yet. Don't panic, Maggie. Just sit tight. They'll never get me to—" Then the connection was broken."

Shayne thought it over, made her repeat the message, then said, "That was all?"

"That was all," she insisted. "Mr. Shayne, if only you hadn't let her go alone! If only you'd—"

"As I understand it, it can't be Shayne's fault," said her husband. Then, searchingly, "There was no threat during the night?"

"None that I was aware of," said the detective. He decided against telling them either about his humiliation or the incident of the bomb. He had an idea Kate's telephoned message about its not having exploded yet was meant for his ears, although at the moment he could not figure it out.

He said, "Have you notified the police or anyone else?"

"How could we?" said Margot, wringing her hands.

"We decided it would be better if we talked to you first.

That way . . ." Harry Lansing shrugged.

"There was no mention of terms?" Shayne pressed. "No ransom demand, no promise of further messages?"

"No, Mr. Shayne." Margot sounded sincere. "What should we do now? Harry wants to call the F.B.I., but I . . ." Again she let it hang.

"For the moment, there isn't much you *can* do," the detective told them. "You'll have to wait it out." He rose, replied to the unspoken query in the Lansings' anxious eyes, "In the meantime, I'm going to do some nosing around. I'll have my secretary call you on the hour, every hour."

They accepted it, although it was obvious that Margot at least wanted him to remain with them until further word came through from the kidnappers. But the redhead was in no mood to sit around and hold anyone's hand.

To him, the whole improbable string of events surrounding the actress' Miami visit simply didn't make sense. Except for the planting of the bomb in his Buick sometime that morning, it might have been a publicity hoax. But two factors tipped the scales against such a snap judgment.

One was the reality of the bomb in his car—the other was

his conviction, having met Katherine Leith, that she was not a woman to lend herself to such a hoax. Furthermore, what he knew of her life was dead against it. Her shunning of all the usually sought-after advertising media was a Hollywood legend of long standing.

He decided to drive back toward the ducker's shack on the edge of the Everglades, this time keeping a sharp eye out for any evidence of violence. Once he was on the swamp road, where traffic was virtually non-existent, he proceeded at a crawl, searching the roadside at his right. He made it to the nocturnal parking place and came up with nothing but a number of time-consuming false alarms.

There was nothing for it but to head back for town, this time scanning closely the other side of the rural road that was little more than a cowpath.

There was a shallow ditch on his right that extended from just beyond the place where he had turned around for a couple of miles. Twice, glittering objects caught his eye and caused him to stop and investigate. One proved to be the top of a beer can, the other an even more nondescript bit of metal reflecting the sun.

Then he spotted a third object that flashed as he approached

it, lying in the ditch close to where it left the road to disappear in the swamp. He was tempted to say the hell with it but that was not his way. Braking to a halt, he got out of the car to investigate.

It looked like a folding fishing rod and the last time he had seen it, Kate was wearing it slung over her back. It was the stainless steel crossbow with which she had threatened him briefly early that morning.

Picking it up with a handkerchief to avoid possible fingerprint obliteration, he placed it carefully in the luggage compartment of the Buick, where it nested securely between the tire-jack and the spare tire.

IV

BEFORE HEADING BACK to town, Shayne called his office and told Lucy he was coming in. She began asking him questions about Katherine Leith until, somewhat grimly, he hung up. At the moment, he wished he had a couple of answers about the film star himself—namely, where she was and who had kidnapped her.

He felt oddly isolated and far from comfortable. The reason behind the attempt on his life continued to puzzle him. The motive behind it constituted

another big question without an answer. To the best of his knowledge, he knew nothing about the actress that could make him a threat to anyone.

He wondered again if the bomb had been a fake, planted by Kate herself as some sort of grisly prank. Certainly, she had defuzed it with incredible assurance. But here again, motive eluded him.

He drove in with a queasiness at the pit of his stomach that was not caused by the bowl of hot chili he had eaten for breakfast.

When he reached the second floor office, he found Tim Rourke there, jawing with Lucy, one long leg tossed over the arm of a chair. The cadaverous *News* reporter greeted him with a frown.

He said, "I thought you were doing a night job. Where in hell have you been?"

"Busy," the redhead told him. Then, to his pert and pretty dark haired secretary, "Anything new since I called, Angel?"

"Nothing urgent," she replied. "Michael, is it true what Tim just old me—that Kate has false teeth?"

"You know Tim never lies," said the detective. And, to his old friend, "What's up, baby?"

"I wish I knew," Rourke replied, "I was hoping you'd tell

me. Where were you last night?"

"On the job," Shayne replied. "Why?"

"Because Kate seems to have vanished from the face of the earth. She had a ten o'clock appointment with Stanely Kronkheit—he's her director—at the Matador. The poop is she didn't show."

"How do you know that?" the detective countered.

"We're being leaked to from the company end," Rourke replied. "Kronkheit's up the wall over it. Seems *la Leith* is not in the habit of breaking appointments, especially business ones. You might be hearing from him if she doesn't show soon."

Shayne looked warily down at the reporter, said, "Do I detect your fine Italian hand in that maneuver, Tim? You get Kronkheit to put me on Kate's tail and then you've got your own inside pipeline to her—you hope."

"Michael is it *true*?" pressed Lucy?"

"Is what true?"

"That she wears dentures."

"Remind me to examine her teeth when I see her again," the detective replied.

"Oh, *Michael*. . .!"

"Than you know where she is?" said Tim.

Shayne shook his head, removed his hat, tossed it accu-

rately over a hook on the wooden tree in the corner, said, "Scout's honor, Tim."

"In a pig's eye" Rourke heaved a mighty sigh, recognizing defeat, then put his up-thrust leg down, added, "I've been digging what dope I can on the Lansings."

"Find out anything?" the detective asked, leading the way to the inner office.

"I don't know why I should tell you when you're so damned close about this."

"But you will." Shayne opened the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet against the wall, pulled out the two-thirds-full bottle of Martell, lifted an eyebrow at the reporter.

Rourke said, "What the hell—why not?"

The redhead's drink was not social—he needed it to calm the butterflies dancing on the underside of his diaphragm. He should have expected Tim's news about Kate not having showed up for her breakfast date with Stanely Kronkheit, but it shook him nevertheless. He had been hoping against hope that her disappearance was a hoax.

Rourke downed his brandy neat, then belched gently and rubbed his flat belly. He said, "From what I can dig out of our morgue and our society editor, Margot Lansing is the McCoy.

Maiden name Spencer of *the Windsor Locks, Connecticut, Spencers, whatever that means.* Finishing school, cotillion debut, the whole schmeer."

"What about the husband?" Shayne refilled their glasses, squinted at the lowered level of the liquor in the bottle against the sunlight that streamed in a window before putting it down.

"Everybody likes him," Rourke replied.

"And what in hell does that mean?"

"Everybody likes him, an amiable little Joe," said Tim. He downed drink two, shuddered but did not belch, then pushed the glass away.

"What does he do for loot?" the redhead asked. "You told me yesterday he was loaded."

"A good question, you bastard. He seems to be some sort of expert on antiques."

"A decorator?"

"Not exactly. He's a guy decorators go to—for a fat fee—when they can't come up with just the piece their rich customers demand."

"A furniture pimp?" said the detective.

"Sort of—wish I'd thought of that. But don't knock it—he apparently does okay out of it."

"Where's he from?"

"Somewhere up north—New York or Philadelphia, take your pick. He travels a lot."

"He'd have to in that dodge," Shayne replied. "How long have they been married?"

"Just over four years."

"Any previous marriages?"

"Not for Margot. Apparently she was pegged as a spinster—by her own choice, mind you—until Harry came along and gobbled her up."

"Watch your language."

"Watch your mind."

Shayne grinned, then went serious. "Not much on him then, I take it."

"Not a hell of a lot—and nothing out of line that I could find out. After all, since when is a decorator news?"

"A point," Shayne admitted. "Okay, Tim, thanks."

The phone on the detective's desk rang. He picked it up, heard Lucy's, "Stanley Kronkheit, Michael," said, "Put him on."

"Can you get over here, Shayne?" The director was brusque to the point of rudeness. And, at the redhead's affirmative, "The Matador, penthouse suite C. Tell you what it's about when you get here."

"I'm on my way," the redhead told him.

"Who was that?" Rourke asked.

"None of your damned business." Shayne shooed him out of the office, called the Lans-

ings. Margot answered. Harry had gone out on business. There was no further news from Kate.

"Mr. Shayne, I'm scared," she said.

"Just sit tight and play it cool," he replied. As he returned handset to cradle, he thought, *Dammit, I'm scared, too.*

V

HE DROVE ACROSS the Bay via-duct to the Matador, a coral pink tower of some thirty-two stories that formed a part of the rampart of resort hotels stretching for miles along the Beach.

The door to penthouse suite C of the Matador was wide open. Inside, a tall man with a sun-bronzed face and forearms and shock of shite hair was engaged in some sort of technical argument with a tiny ferret-faced lady whose tightly drawn black hair sprouted pencils like a senora's comb.

"*Dammit!*" he roared in the deep voice Shayne had overheard the night before. "We want costume fittings by Wednesday, and the turquoise dress is out. Won't work against Arky's magenta drawing room set."

"Neither will Kate's hair, the little woman said stubbornly. "You're going to have to get

Arky to change the color of his set."

"Hasn't got time," said the white-haired man. When the little woman protested further, he folded his shirt-sleeved arms and lifted his eyes to the ceiling. In the act, he spotted the newcomer in the doorway, said, "Shayne?" And, at the detective's assent, "Come on in."

Then, to the little lady, "Edie, you and Arky work it out."

She pulled a pencil out of her hair, made a stabbing motion of frustration, opened her mouth, closed it again, then marched past Shayne breathing fire and slammed the door behind her. Kronkheit shook his head after her, then grinned and came to the detective with big right hand outstretched in greeting.

"Edie James," he said. "Costumes."

"I admired the way she stood up to you," Shayne told the director.

"With seven Oscars, Edie stands up to everybody." Kronkheit gestured toward a sofa littered with scripts, added, "Sit down, Shayne. Have a drink?"

The redhead nodded and the director said, "What'll it be? Me, I could use a belt of Jack Daniel's." He moved to a well stocked portable bar, took care of them both, then dropped into an armchair across from the

sofa and studied the detective for a moment before downing a sizable slug in a single gulp.

"Worried about Kate," he said. "Reporter fellow here earlier seemed to think you might be of help. First appointment she's ever missed. Can't locate her anywhere." A pause, then, "Think you can help?"

"I can try," said the detective. "How about the police? They have the facilities."

The director shook his leonine head. "No fuzz," he said. "Not with Kate. Whatever is detaining her is private—bet on that. Get the cops after her, she'll be spitting nails."

"Like I said, I can try."

"What's your scale?" Kronkheit asked.

"At the moment—zilch," Shayne replied. "I'm already on it. I was hoping you could help me?"

"*Merde!*" said the director. "Who hired you?"

"I can't tell you that," said the redhead.

"*Merce, merde, merde!*" exclaimed Kronkheit. "It's costing us eleven gees a day and shooting hasn't even started. Anybody but Kate—out! But she's our one bankable asset."

"Sorry."

"*You're sorry! I'm up the creek without the proverbial paddle. Find her. Double your fee.*"



"I'm on my way." Shayne got up, moved toward the door, very slowly.

"Damned ducker's shack!" Kronkheit growled. "Anybody could get at her—anybody!"

"Nobody got to her last night," the detective replied. "I was there."

"Thank God for that!" said Kronkheit. "What about this morning?"

"She rode off on her bike." Shayne had no desire to give

the director the details of what had happened.

"Why didn't you follow?" the director barked.

"Because I got an idea she would not take kindly to that," the redhead told him.

"*Damn!*" Kronkheit ran nicotine-stained fingers through his shock of white hair, slammed his glass down hard on the table, said, "Hell of it is, we got Syndicate money behind this show. Makes me nervous."

"How did that happen? From the little I know of Kate . . ."

"Oh—looked okay for openers. Straight bank-corporation backing," the director explained. "Cover—all of it."

"How'd you find that out?"

"Call from a man named Victor Sarafin. Ever hear of him, Shayne?" And, when the redhead nodded, "By that time, in too deep to back out—all of us, including Kate."

Shayne thought that over while the director continued to talk in his rapid-fire half-sentences. Enzo Sarafin was a power behind the power behind whatever sort of throne modern mob rulers use. The redhead knew, of course, that underworld money was nothing new to the film industry—but it was something new for a Kathering Leith opus. He wondered why the actress hadn't pulled out when she learned of it, asked

Kronkheit when the director paused for breath.

The big white-haired man spread his hands and said, "What *I* thought, but can't figure Kate in advance. Said, 'We're in too deep. I'm no rat to desert a sinking ship. Let's see she doesn't sink.' Never forget her for that." Than, as Shayne rose, "Lot's of luck, Shayne. Mean it!"

As he took the elevator down to the basement garage, Shayne reflected that all he had to do to earn a fat extra fee was to find Kate. He wished he knew where in hell to look. It occurred to him that Jack's Outlet Emporium was a mere five blocks from the Matador. Since, in a way, this was where the star's bicycle came from, he decided to give the place a lookd.

Such an emporium might have been out of place alongside flanking luxury hotels were it not for the obviously expensive wares displayed in its broad double windows. Cheek by jewel were gleaming super-barbecue ovens, water-skiing equipment, costly deep-sea fishing rigs, scuba diving devices, sports clothing, even a complete motor yacht with harpoonist's pulpit overhanging the raked prow.

Inside, it made the redhead think of Abercrombie & Fitch South. Wending his way past

counters of games that ranged from tooled leather backgammon kits to full sized billiard tables, Tiffany lamps, racks of gaudy blazers and jackets, electric golf carts and exorbitant stereo and television equipment, he moved toward an area devoted to shining new bicycles of every conceivable make and type.

As he stood studying them, seeking he knew not what, a beautifully tailored young man with dark brown Mod haircut and tan turtleneck approached him and said, "Anything I can do for you, Mr. Shayne?"

"This is quite a plant, Pete," the detective replied. "You been here long?"

"Since it opened last year." Pete's smile was slow and gentle. "Yes, I know—it's a far cry from being security man at Jay's Barrel House."

"Like it?" Shayne inquired.

"Who wouldn't?" was the reply. Then, "Still, I kind of miss the action at the old place."

"It can't be the same without you," the redhead assured him. "Well, I was just passing by—thought I'd take a look at it. I've heard about it."

"Any time, Shayne," was the reply. "You're always welcome."

In a pig's eye! the detective thought.

As he got his Buick started, he pondered the presence of

Pete Bonney in Jack's. Born Pietro Bonnivanno, Pete was a suave and generally genial front man for the mobsters that owned the Dixieland jazz joint across the Bay long known as Jay's Barrel House. Smiling, amiable, but rough as rivets when things got out of hand. As accomplished a gutter fighter as the redhead could remember.

His presence at the outlet emporium indicated only one thing to the detective—Jack's had to be Syndicate owned.

So what did it mean? Probably nothing. But the fact that Kate's custom built one-of-a-kind bicycle had turned up there for sale suggested to Shayne that the emporium's stock procurement techniques might make interesting study.

He wondered if Harry Lansing, as an apparently established decorator's consultant, might not have knowledge of some of the seamier sides of his profession. Pausing at a drug store, he found Lansing's business address in a smart shopping section of Miami proper, decided to drop in there on the way back to his client's condominium... for he had resolved to stay with Margot until he got some answers he felt certain she had not given him.

It was in the course of this return journey that the redhead discovered he had picked up a

tail, a dove grey Pontiac with bright chromework. The fact that he was being followed lifted Shayne's spirits more than anything that had happened thus far. It indicated somebody was sufficiently aroused by his activities to believe him worth following.

He made no effort to evade his pursuer, parked in back of Lansing's store and went on in.

A greater contrast with the brash display of the emporium would have been hard to find, the redhead decided. In place of linoleum, soft carpeting caressed the soles of his shoes. Here, only a few objects were on display, these of the most exquisite artistry of times long gone. While Shayne was no expert on antiques, even he could not miss the magnificent craftsmanship and talent that had gone into their making—manufacture was not the word here.

A blonde young lady who could have stepped out of a debutante gathering approached him sweetly and, like Pete Bonney before her, asked if there were anything she could do for him, but so genteely that he refrained even from thinking the obvious ribald answer.

"Mr. Lansing is not here now," she replied to his question. "I don't believe he'll be coming in today."

Shayne expressed his regrets

and departed. The grey Pontiac was parked five cars in front of his Buick. It pulled out of its place after Shayne had passed and stayed discreetly behind him the rest of the route to the Lansing's apartment building.

When he rang the bell, nobody answered. From the hall outside, the chime was inaudible and it occurred to him that it might be out of order. He clenched his right fist and gave it a series of hard knocks. At the fourth rap, there was a gentle click and it moved fractionally inward.

It was unlocked.

Again, the redhead felt the prickling sensation at the nape of his neck that was always a warning of danger close at hand. Almost by reflex action, his right hand went to his belt holster and drew the Colt forty-five from its sheath.

Crouching low, he slowly put further pressure on the edge of the door with the handgun barrel, remaining well to the side so that he would not present an easy target to anyone lurking inside. When the opening was wide enough, he peered cautiously around the jamb, but the carpeted ten-foot length of hall that greeted his gaze was silent and empty.

Rising swiftly, the detective tiptoed over the threshold, pushing the door silently shut

behind him and turning the bolt. If an intruder was within and took flight via what he deemed to be an unbolted exit-way, the fact that it *was* bolted might delay his escape.

Conversely, if Shayne were put to rout, he would be little delayed since he knew it was locked.

He made his way carefully along the short corridor, hugging the wall and making a mental map of those parts of the condominium he had visited. Ahead, on his right where it ended, lay the large living room with its picture window and, beyond it and to the left, the breakfast room with the terrace beyond. To his left, he presumed lay bedrooms with kitchen beyond and behind them.

Even the rich, he thought, had to sleep somewhere.

The living room was empty. Feeling unhappily naked and exposed, since it offered no cover en route to the breakfast room, Shayne moved more swiftly—but neither sound nor movement greeted his progress.

At the breakfast room door, he halted.

Margot Lansing was seated at the table as the detective had left her earlier in the day. Her head rested on folded arms and, for a moment, Shayne thought she had fallen asleep.



Then, taking a step nearer, he was able to see the tabletop's far end above the large floral centerpiece that had blocked his view.

It was covered with blood as were his client's lap and lower body. She sat in a pool of crimson that, by its size, indicated she was dead and, by its still-bright hue that she had not been dead long.

How long he stared at her body, he did not know—it might have been minutes or mere seconds—but what brought him out of it was a sound.

It was the faintest of brushing sounds, a mere whisper of fabric against fabric, the sound made by someone moving with infinite caution. It seemed to come from behind him, not directly from living room or hall but from, perhaps, the bedroom on the hall's other side.

Since the living room carpet offered silence and he had no idea what noise producing surfaces he might find in dining room or kitchen beyond, the detective retraced the route by which he had come. Again hugging the wall, gun in hand, he moved back toward the end of the entry hall, pausing by the open doorway with weapon at the ready, waiting for some other sound.

When it came, it was again from behind him, from the direction of the breakfast room he had so recently left, the room where Margot Lansing's seated body lay silent in death.

Then it came again, another footfall, louder and evidently closer. Shayne, moving carefully still, turned in the direction of the new noises, aiming his gun in that direction.

He heard the other footfall from the entry hall too late. Before he could countermove, he was brought up short by the unmistakable jab of a gun muzzle into his short ribs.

A male voice said, "Drop your

weapon on the carpet and put your hands behind your neck."

As the redhead complied, a heavy-set man came through the breakfast room door, bearing a thirty-eight caliber revolver in his right hand.

Shayne had been whipsawed by a couple of experts.

VI

SHAYNE RECOGNIZED the heavy-set man immediately. He was Walker Gibbs. Miami District Manager for the F.B.I. Gibbs said, putting his revolver away. "It's okay, Reilly. This is Mike Shayne." Then, to the detective, "What in hell are you doing here?"

Shayne told him Mrs. Lansing was his client. After a brief hesitation, he added, "She hired me to keep an eye on Katherine Leith."

Reilly, a reedy type with horn rims, said, "Do you know where *she* is?"

It was a moment of truth. Since the F.B.I. was obviously already in, there seemed little point in holding back word of her kidnapping.

He said, "One question first."

"Go ahead." Gibbs' eyes were the blue of steel.

"You didn't murder my client by any chance?"

"Negative," Gibbs replied. "We came in here five minutes

ahead of you and found her like that."

"Was the door unlocked then?"

Gibbs nodded, and then said, "Katherine Leith?"

"According to the Lansings, she was kidnapped this morning. They got a call from a party unknown. Kate came on, told them she was okay. That's the bit."

Gibbs uttered a four-letter word under his breath. Reilly, who had holstered his own gun, said, "This doesn't seem to be your day, Shayne. The lady in there hires you to watch Leith, then Leith is kidnapped and your client gets shot."

The redhead felt anger at the G-man's tone but held his temper in check, said, "What killed her?"

"An explosive bullet at close range, fired from behind. Okay, you'd better call in the local law, Reilly." Then, to the detective, "Shayne, we'd better have a talk."

Reilly called the police. Before they arrived, there were two more visitors—Harry Lansing and Stanley Kronkheit, whose contrasting heights reminded the redhead of Mutt and Jeff in the old cartoon strip.

Lansing keeled over on the carpet in a dead faint when Gibbs told him his wife was

murdered. Kronkheit ran fingers through his white thatch and said, "Jesus!" Then he muttered something about "eleven gees a day." Then, to the F.B.I. men, "Hope to hell you find her before the company goes broke."

There was little doubt where his thoughts were running. Then the director added, "I called Harry L. to get the score on Kate's snatch. Then we came over here to talk to his wife and found you guys here."

Reilly, after calling the police, got busy reviving Lansing, who sat up and was helped to a chair. The Homicide boys began arriving and Gibbs turned it over to them. Then, to Reilly, "You stick around just in case. I'm riding to the store with Shayne."

While hardly friends or even acquaintances, the detective had been aware of Walker Gibbs almost since his arrival to take over the Miami F.B.I. office some eight months earlier. Their paths had not hitherto crossed but had come close to it more than once, and the redhead was certain Gibbs knew about him.

"No hurry," said Gibbs when they reached the Buick. "Suppose you tell me the whole bit."

Shayne did so, from the moment his late client had called him in the day before. He stuck

to facts as he knew them, volunteering few opinions. Gibbs listened in moody silence, chain-smoking 120-millimeter cigarettes.

When the redhead finished, Gibbs said, "That bomb under your radiator hood. It smells."

"I know," Shayne replied. "I haven't figured it either. I mean..." He let it tail off.

"Exactly." Another pause, then, "You know Kate was in touch with us about that bike of hers."

Shayne shook his head and pondered the possibilities emanating from Gibbs' remark. Once again he considered the larger implications lying in shadow behind the purchase in Jack's Outlet Emporium of a bicycle stolen two years before in Brentwood, California.

He said, "Do you suppose that was it, that her contacting you led to her kidnapping?"

"What else? Shayne, since you're evidently shrewd enough to read between the lines, I'm going to level with you. We've been conducting a nationwide investigation for more than a year, seeking to unravel the workings of a vast network of storehouses and shops for the disposal of stolen goods.

"We've had Jack's under observation, of course, and a number of other outlets right here in Dade County. But we

haven't been able to come up with a credible witness willing to stand the heat and make a charge stick.

"Then Kate came to us with her bicycle theft and we were beginning to think we finally had our opening wedge in cracking this ring. She was supposed to see me early this morning to make a deposition. She didn't show, so we decided to see if Mrs. Lansing knew where she was."

"What about the snatch? Are you going to tell the police about that?"

Gibbs shook his head, said, "Not yet—and I'm counting on you to keep your mouth shut, Shayne. You have a reputation for being discreet. Don't blow it on this one."

"I won't," the detective promised. They were pulling in front of the Federal Building in which the local F.B.I. offices were housed.

Gibbs leaned on the open window sill after getting out, said, "We'll be expecting to hear from you. And as for that tail you've picked up, it's not one of ours. As far as we're concerned, you're still employed wherever you can find an employer—but just don't get in our way."

A good man, the detective decided as he pulled away. He smiled, albeit grimly, at the

G-man's remark about his tail, let it ride for the moment. At least, he thought, there was some reason for the film star's kidnapping. Somebody was holding her hostage in an effort to use her as collateral in making a deal—which was why no ransom terms had been mentioned in the telephone call.

He felt worried and footloose. It was late afternoon and, at the moment, he had nowhere to go, but the grey sedan was still behind him. He decided to see if he couldn't shake his tail and turn the tables on him, becoming pursuer instead of pursued.

There was a massive new development, a business and residential complex not far ahead of him, with the highway dividing on either side of the towering central structure. If he could put enough distance between his tail and himself before cutting out of sight around the second curve, he could take a downramp to the lower level, emerge comfortably behind the grey Pontiac when the upper level rejoined the lower two blocks further on.

He loafed along until he reached the upramp and, with the first turn dead ahead, cut in more gas as he swung around it, then braked and raced around the second turn and down the narrow ramp. When the levels merged, he

spotted the rear end of the Pontiac four cars ahead and felt a glow of triumph as he followed the car that had been following him.

He felt a certain respect for the driver of the Pontiac. Although he must have known he had lost his quarry, there was no indication of alarm, no sudden pull over to the side of the road, no jockeying for the left turn lane to retrace his steps. He simply proceeded at moderate speed to a traffic circle, where he took off toward the west.

Shayne followed through the waning afternoon light.

They entered a residential district of large houses with well kept hedges and lawns. After a couple of further turns, the grey car turned in at a right-hand driveway whose entrance was flanked by twin stone gateposts topped with carriage lamps not yet turned on.

The detective drove on until he reached a left side driveway, used it to turn around and came back to park on the opposite side of the street, short of the gate his quarry had entered. There he parked and lit a cigaret while he pondered his next step.

When he saw the two men emerge from the driveway on foot and walk toward him, he

made no move, simply sat there and waited for them. They came up on either side of the Buick but made no overt threatening move. Both were hatless, young, expensively dressed, sunbronzed. But the detective did not fail to note the mild bulges under their jackets that indicated shoulder holsters despite the excellent tailoring of the fabric that covered their weapons.

"Mr. Shayne?" said the one on his side of the car. And, at the detective's nod, "Mr. Sarafin wants to talk to you."

They got into the car, one in front, one in back, and directed him to the driveway, which ended in a turnaround in front of a costly looking slate roofed fieldstone house. As they got out, the lamps on either side of the door went on.

VII

THE MAN WHO awaited him inside was of medium height, with slate grey hair and a corvine Mediterranean face. He wore a sapphire blue-velvet house jacket over a ruffled white shirt, regarded the redhead with a thin smile of greeting.

"Mr. Shayne," he said, "how good of you to come! I'm Enzo Sarafin. It was clever of you to turn the tables on Pedro here,

but it suited my purpose to have you come here."

Shayne opened his hands in a here-I-am gesture, said, "It was clever of Pedro to spot me following him."

"All right!" With a fingerflick, Sarafin dismissed the two young gunmen, led the way into a study lined with leather-bound books. His offer of a drink was accepted and served by the host himself.

Not until they were both seated, did Sarafin say, "I suppose you know who I am?"

The detective said, "I've heard of you, of course. I even have some idea of *what* you are. But who . . ." He shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Good enough." Another expressive gesture to dismiss the matter. "The reason I wish to see you concerns the actress Katherine Leith. As you must know, she has apparently been kidnapped. We want her released—unharmed."

"So," said Shayne, "does her director, so does the F.B.I.—I suppose you know her hostess, Margot Lansing, was murdered this afternoon."

"Put my name on the list," said Sarafin, sipping his vermouth Cassis.

"Why are you telling me, Sarafin?"

"Because I want to leave no stone unturned. Get her out of

there alive and you can write your own ticket."

"I should think your boys could do the job," the redhead replied.

Sarafin shook his slate grey hand. "Her rescue must come from outside," he said, his voice still soft. "If I send my boys in, they're bound to be identified with unthinkable results."

"Unthinkable?"

"Shayne, you must have heard of the gang warfare of the Twenties." And, at the redhead's nod, "The would be infants' play alongside the sort of eruption a confrontation today would set off. We are standing on the lip of a bubbling crater that could well disrupt American society to say nothing of what was once fondly referred to as the underworld. I shall not bore you with the intricacies of the situation, beyond explaining that the real powers are gravely split and that the kidnapping of Miss Leith today could very well cause the explosion."

"How so?"

"For many years now, the wiser heads in my business—and I include myself among them—have been doing our utmost to disassociate the organization from violence. With the capital we have gained in the past, with the investments we now hold, we have little or

no need for it. We can grow more powerful without it."

A pause for another sip, then, "Unfortunately, violence does not die easily. Those who have found it convenient in the past tend to revert to it when problems arise. Even when it flourished, our business survival was predicated upon the theory that we only destroyed ourselves.

"We have never, to my knowledge, threatened violence to legitimate individuals, especially prominent individuals. To do so would be to invite a radical wave of reform that I am certain not even our business could long survive."

"Why was Kate snatched, Sarafin?" Shayne asked. "Because you have an investment in the film?"

Sarafin permitted himself the merest shadow of a smile as he shook his head slowly. "I don't believe so—though it might have been incidental," he said. "No, Miss Leith was picked up in an effort to cover a costly mistake. And in kidnapping her, a larger mistake—in fact a blunder—has been committed.

"Some tens of millions of Americans worship Katherine Leith as a symbol—the living symbol—of what our womanhood should and can be. If they harm her, the reaction we dread will be inevitable.

"It was caused by sheer carelessness—letting her bicycle be put on sale in Miami Beach at a time when she was known to be visiting the city? If that wasn't known, it should have been. That Margot Lansing should have picked it up may be merely a matter of bad luck—but, as Napoleon once remarked, 'I want no unlucky generals.'

"What about Margot Lansing's murder?" the detective countered.

"Incredible folly—these fools are capable of anything! That she should have been killed I find interesting as well as reprehensible."

"Interesting?" Shayne was puzzled.

"What could that sweet, foolish woman have known, what could she have done, that anyone should order her removal by force? Ask yourself that, Shayne."

"I have," the detective said drily. "My personal jury is still out."

"Then you will undertake the assignment of bringing Katherine Leith out alive?"

"Sarafin," said Shayne, "I would gladly undertake it but for one thing. No, it's not money. Margot Lansing paid me to protect her and, even though I was not actually responsible for her safety at the

time she was snatched, I feel guilty as hell."

"Then what's the problem, Shayne?" said the older man in his low-pitched voice.

"I don't have the slightest idea where she is."

"Perhaps we can help a little on that," Sarafin replied. "While we do not know the exact spot where she is being held, we can, I believe, at least circle an area."

"I'm listening, Sarafin."

"Shayne, Katherine Leith has not emerged from the swamp."

"You mean the ducker's shack?" The detective was astonished. "I myself saw her wheel away from it this morning—and I'm sure she hasn't come back. The whole area must be swarming with police and F.B.I. operatives by now."

"Not the shack, of course." Sarafin dismissed the obvious with contempt. "Shayne, that area of the Everglades is honeycombed with all but invisible lanes leading to other hunting places, some of them quite elaborate. It will take even the F.B.I. with all its resources weeks to locate and search all of them. And at night . . ." He shrugged.

"You expect me to find this place alone?"

"I expect you to look. Shayne, I know about the bomb placed

in your car this morning—never mind how I know, I know. On the surface, an absurd move."

"So?"

"It could only have been placed there for once reason—a fear that you knew something that would lead you to the place they intended to take Katherine Leith."

"But I was never even *in* that part of the Everglades until yesterday," the redhead replied. "So how could I—"

Mr. Sarafin held up a hand for silence.

"Think, Shayne. If it is nothing *you* know, then it must be something *she* knows, something her kidnappers know she knows, something they feared Katherine Leith might have imparted to you."

"Jesus!" said the detective. "Something she knows that they know she knows that she might have told me?"

"Exactly." Another pause, then, "What other reason could they have had for killing Mrs. Lansing today?"

"You mean, *she* knew?"

"Of course."

"But *what* did she know?"

"Don't disappoint me, Shayne—it has to be the location to which they intended to take Katherine Leith, the location to which they did take her."



"But she told me nothing like that."

"She must have given you some clue—*something*. Think, Shayne!"

"Why don't *you* know where she is?"

For the shadow of a second, the older man's face became a mask of death. Then he said; "Unfortunately, *we* make mis-

takes as well. That area is so full of byways and hideaways we simply do not know them all. And with the F.B.I. in on it, yes, of course, we are aware of Mr. Gibbs and his interest in Miss Leith—we can hardly afford to blanket the area ourselves."

"What if *I'm* shooed off by the F.B.I.—or the County Sheriff's deputies?"

"Now you *do* disappoint me, Shayne. With your reputation and record, I hoped you would mind them minor obstacles."

"I don't believe my own publicity," the detective said. "Why should *you*?"

"I believe I know truth from publicity, Shayne."

"What if I need the F.B.I. or the County boys to get her out?"

"It would spell her death," said Mr. Sarafin. "No, you must do it alone. At least I want you to find her. After that, perhaps we can work out a practicable approach. *Find* her—that's all I ask. I assure you, I personally shall make it worth your while."

"That's not what's worrying me. I've still got to find the place. And I don't know where to look."

"I told you." Mr. Sarafin moved to a desk, wrote on a small piece of paper. "My personal number here in Miami,"

he said. "I shall await your call."

"I hope to hell you get it," the redhead told him. "What if I don't find it?"

Sarafin shrugged and spread his hands, said, "That is as God wills it."

Shayne walked out of the house feeling like a man trapped in a giant electric blender with the juice on full. He had heard of Leo Sarafin, of course, although, like most other Americans, he had never laid eyes on the behind-the-scenes underworld ruler. A veteran of the early New York gang wars, Sarafin had long since outgrown actual warfare, had assumed a posture of such wealth and eminence and personal power as to be considered almost—not quite but almost—as respectable an American institution as pecan pie or the hula hoop.

Rumor also had it that the old wolf still had his fangs—and for once Shayne was quite willing to accept rumor after what he had just seen and heard.

Two underworld empires, two criminal concepts, in near-collision, their approaching confrontation triggered by the stupid lapse of putting Kate's bicycle on sale in a location where it could be returned to her. The actress, a born

crusader, had taken the matter to Walker Gibbs and the F.B.I., who had been conducting their own investigation of a nationwide syndicate for fencing stolen goods almost a year.

How had word of Kate's visit, of her determination to bring a thief or thieves to justice, leaked out?

That was one question. But there was another confronting the redhead. What, if anything, had the actress said or done that could be construed as a clue to her whereabouts?

Shayne drove slowly through the early evening half-light, trying to puzzle out the problem. He did not think Leo Sarafin would take retributive action toward himself if he failed to come up with an answer that worked. But Sarafin would be through with him, and even the marginal disapproval of a man of such power was nothing to disregard.

What in hell had she said? What in hell had she done?

As he drove almost unconsciously toward the swamp lane, making no attempt to beat the traffic, the redhead went over her every word, her every move, during the brief time they had been in each other's company.

He ran over it three times, slowly, carefully—and came up with a fat, derisive zero. There

had been no casual conversation between them in which she might have dropped the sort of clue he and Sarafin were looking for. None at all.

She had ridden off on her bike, leaving behind her a distinct impression that she did not want him following her. Why? Because she disliked being followed or because she did not wish to be followed to some particular place.

It could have been either of these.

After that? The trip to town, the word of her kidnapping, then the retracing of steps or rather tire marks. Then the spotting of the crossbow lying in the ditch alongside the rutted lane.

The crossbow—could that be it?

At least it gave him a thin possibility to work on. He put his foot down on the gas . . .

VIII

TO THE BEST OF his memory, the place where he had spotted the crossbow lay just under three miles on the near side of the parking lot. He had measured it by the odometer while making the afternoon run. Since the distance from the parking place close to the ducker's shack was 5.3 miles, this meant that he had approximately 2.4 to 2.5

miles to travel in order to reach the vicinity.

There was no roadblock nor other sign of F.B.I. or constabulary activity—if agents were on duty in the vicinity, Shayne decided, they were currently clustered in the area near the shack. He hoped fervently they would stay there, not wishing to become embroiled with the law while trying to carry out Mr. Sarafin's assignment.

It was going to be difficult enough to find the place where he had spotted the crossbow in the dark. And there remained a strong possibility that, even if he located it, it might merely have been tossed away in the confusion of the actress' snatch, not be a clue to her whereabouts at all.

As he drove slowly down the lumpy trail with dimmed lights, he did his utmost to remember what surrounding signs there were that he might identify. There had been a thick clump of untended shrubbery just across the trail from the spot, crowned by a pair of palm trees that leaned over the trail.

There were similar growths but, as he recalled, none close to the place where the old-fashioned weapon had been thrown. He watched the odometer narrowly by the dashboard

lights as he crept further into the edge of the mighty swamp, using only his parking lights to guide him over the rough and narrow trail.

When he had proceeded just over two miles and was short of a well masked curve, he pulled off in a small cleared area on the side opposite the ditch, cut his lights and proceeded on foot, doing his best to move without making sudden loud noises.

It took him twelve minutes to locate the approximate site in the darkness. Once there, he halted, looking for he knew not what. If he had not noticed a driveway by daylight, it promised to be a lot tougher at night.

If, indeed, any sort of driveway existed behind the dark wall of trees and undergrowth.

Judging that any such way must be on his right, away from the ditch—the other side in this area was all swamp—he stood in the dark shadow of two palm trees, seeking to make himself invisible while he pondered it out.

Save for the croaking of frogs and the occasional drone of a distant plane, just as the night before there was no sound. While he stood there, his errand grew more and more idiotic in his mind. He decided to give it another half hour by the

luminous dial on his watch, then to give it up.

His self-imposed deadline was all but on him when he heard the snap of a small branch under the weight of a heavy foot, followed by a male voice saying, "Christ, you're clumsy!"

"I didn't see it," another male voice replied in aggrieved accents. "How the hell am I supposed to—"

"Shut up," said the first voice. "And no more false alarms."

"But I heard a car."

"So you come back to the house to tell us, leaving your post unguarded. You go on back and tell the chief I'm taking over here."

"Okay, okay."

The protester blundered off through the undergrowth, making considerable noise. Shayne waited till he was out of earshot before he made his move.

The voices seemed to have come from close to the other side of his own double-palm cover. He had recognized that of the man who remained, having heard it only a few hours earlier. It belonged to Pete Bonney, the Syndicate don who had greeted him at Jack's Outlet Emporium.

He knew now that his hunch had paid off. His hand went to his belt and he drew the .45 from its holster. Looking

around, he sought some sort of stone or small branch with eyes now well accustomed to the darkness, found a baseball sized rock almost rock almost at his feet.

The ruse was old as the hills but still effective. Moving in catlike silence around the two trees and half crouching behind the clump of scrub, the detective lobbed the rock well down the road, angling it into the growth on Pete Bonney's and his side of the trail.

It ricocheted off some obstacle and made two more crashes before it stopped—enough to put the wind up in Pete.

The hoodlum came out onto the trail, throwing caution to the winds, gun in hand, no more than eight feet away. Shayne made a lunge for him, seeking to disarm him before he looked back and to his left.

As he lunged, the detective tripped over a hitherto unseen root protruding from the lane's surface, went down on his hands and knees as his .45 disappeared into the undergrowth with a thud.

The noise of the redhead's stumble caused Bonney to whirl in his direction. He was armed, Shayne was not. It was hardly a moment for cool deliberation. Instinct and conditioned reflexes would have to make up for the weapons gap.

Shayne launched himself in a low flying tackle and felt the barrel of the mobster's handgun glance off his left shoulder blade. His arms encircled Bonney's knees and yanked, causing him to collapse in sections like a folding table. Before Bonney could recover, the detective made a two-handed grab for the wrist of his gun hand. He came up into a crouch, pulling the mobman up with him, his aim being to break Bonney's right wrist over his own left thigh, causing him to drop his weapon.

But his opponent's wrist was harmlessly limp as he slammed it down hard and Shayne received a jolting left cross to the right side of his own jaw while both his hands were occupied, a blow that knocked him clear and sprawling in the middle of the trail on his hands and knees.

He saw Bonney's gun, an ugly snub-nosed revolver, lying in a rut and made a dive for it. So did the mobman, and the two of them wrestled for it silently, save for occasional grunts of effort. The mobman held it high above his head while Shayne reached for it with both hands, twisting rapidly to lessen the impact of left-handed smashes and a jolting blow in the right hip from Bonney's knee.

The detective uttered a snort of triumph as he got the grip he wanted on the mobman's wrists and squeezed—but the gun spurted out of his opponent's grip and arched away to land with a splash in the ditch on the other side of the trail.

It was bare hands from there on in, and Shayne's opponent, beneath his suave facade, was a tough veteran hoodlum who knew every gutter trick. The redhead could only reply in kind. He took savage punishment from fists, knees and feet, barely ducked a karate chop to the left side of his neck that might have put him down for keeps had he not sensed it was coming and got a hand up inside to lessen its force.

As it was, his head rung like an anvil, but he was able to deliver a short, vicious dirty blow to Pete's groin that doubled him up with a moan of agony, he then completed the job with a karate chop of his own to the base of Bonney's skull in one of the granddaddies of all rabbit punches.

Bonney lay sprawled on his face with his nose in the dirt. He was not breathing. The detective dragged his body to the ditch side of the road and threw it in. Then he began a search for the guns, either or both, that had been lost during the brouhaha.

In the darkness, it was hopeless. Shayne stood on the edge of the trail, feeling naked. He did not dare venture into what almost had to be an adder's nest unharmed.

He started back toward the Buick, was halfway there before he recalled that he reserve Police Special Magnum .38 he usually kept locked in a special compartment under the instrument panel was at the gunsmith's having its trigger mechanism replaced.

He considered calling either Sarafin or Walker Gibbs to report on the situation. But he was not satisfied that either call, with the action that must inevitably follow, would ensure the actress' survival. After all, Kate was his first concern in this case, both personally and professionally. He had to know more before he brought anyone else in.

But how...?

Reaching the car in its off-the-trail parking place, he scowled at it, laid a hand on its rear luggage compartment—and came up with at least a partial solution to his personal disarmament problem.

Unlocking the compartment, he fished out the actress' crossbow from its nesting place by the spare tire and studied it in the semi-darkness. If he could manage to assemble the

weapon and discover how it worked, it might be ideal for the job—a lethal arm that could kill while making virtually no noise.

He had trouble finding the central lug that opened it up, but once he turned it, the rest was relatively simply. Assembled, it was supplied with eight steel-tipped bolts, four to each side of the shaft in special racks.

The problem of reloading remained. To the best of the redhead's memory, Medieval crossbows had to be cranked laboriously between shots—but by testing he discovered that Kate's missile launcher rewound itself at the pressure of a button alongside the trigger, apparently battery operated.

He hoped the dry cell had plenty of juice but put all such worries aside as he headed back for whatever lay behind the twin palms and the clump of swamp shrubbery.

Ignoring Pete Bonney's body in the ditch, Shayne moved cautiously around the natural barrier to discover a rude rutted driveway hidden behind a screen of palm fronds. With the silent weapon in front of him at the ready, he pushed on through to find himself treading a reasonably well-marked pathway, masked by overhead foliage.

It was inky dark in there and he felt sympathy for the churl who had trodden on a stick to make the detective aware of the path's existence. Moving extremely slowly and testing each footfall, the redhead managed to avoid repeating the error.

The narrow trail led a long way back from the roadway behind him—a good fifty yards before it took a sharp turn around another clump of trees and growth to reveal on his right a cleared area surrounded by tall trees that apparently masked from aerial observation the cluster of small buildings at its further end.

He could spot small patches of water beyond the buildings, indicating that the regular approach was through the swamp itself. Keeping to the deeper shadows at the left edge of the clearing, the detective made his cautious way toward the rustic hideaway.

At first, the complex of structures—apparently a house or lodge of two stories with two smaller outbuildings, one of them a boathouse—looked dark. But in the house itself, as he came closer, there was light—revealed by broken streaks at the edges of window blinds and an occasional hole or chink.

The slanting roof of one of the outbuildings ended no more than seven feet above the

spongy ground. If he could get up there, the redhead would be in an ideal spot to observe what happened around the house—at least until daylight.

IX

CAREFULLY PLACING the crossbow on the roof, he found a vertical wooden strut that supported a corner of the edifice. It enabled him to get purchase to swing himself up onto the shingled, slanting surface. There, he reclaimed his weapon and worked his way further upward so that he could lie on his belly and observe whatever was to come.

Only just in time—he was barely settled when a door of the lodge was flung open, revealing a rectangle of almost blinding light. A man emerged from within to stand there and say over his shoulder, "You keep things quiet here while I check Pete."

"Relieve him and send him back," came the reply from within. "I want Pete here—in case."

"I'll be glad when it's over," said the man in the doorway, stepping outside.

"You and me both," came the voice from within. "We can't hold on much longer—not with that bitch upstairs."

"Hang in there, Joe." With

that, the visible speaker shut the door behind him and stepped away from the house, walking the narrow alley between the two buildings.

At least, Shayne thought, he had every reason to suppose that Kate Leith was being held upstairs in the lodge across the alley. *The bastards!* he thought. He wondered how many of them there were.

A sudden throbbing sound came from beneath him, evidently from the electric plant for the complex. It caused the departing kidnapper to stop and turn to discover its source—apparently, he was new to the locale—and at the moment the detective could see him in clear focus.

Raising the crossbow, Shayne pointed it at him—a regular sighting aim was impossible in the darkness—and sent a bolt whistling into his face. He crumpled to the ground without a sound.

That Shayne taught grimly, makes two less of them—counting Pete.

He wondered how many more there were...

He heard a cry from below and behind him, and another man came running down the alley toward the mobman the detective had just felled.

As he ran, he called, "Hey, Chief! Something's happened to

Joe!" He drew a pistol from his belt as he ran.

The front door was flung open again, illuminating the scene. Two more men came out, one holding what looked like a sawed-off shotgun. In silhouette, the detective recognized neither of them.

"I don't like it," one of them said. "What could happen to Joe? Dave, cover Frank just in case."

There was light in an upstairs window directly across from Shayne as somebody peered out, uttered a curse, then drew the blind wider. The light reached the outbuilding roof where the redhead was lying and a black-haired, burley shirt-sleeved man saw him and opened his mouth to yell.

Shayne, who had reloaded the crossbow, put a bolt right between his uneven rows of front teeth. The man dropped as if a trapdoor had opened under him.

He reloaded the silent weapon while the confusion continued below. Movement across in the upstairs window diverted his attention and he swung the weapon back that way, ready to fire again.

But the head that appeared was fringed with copper curls and its lower half sealed with masking tape. Shayne waved and the move caught the eye of

Dave, who swung the shotgun upward and fired both barrels. But the redhead had leaped across the alley, roof to roof and was scrambling through the open window before a second blast could be fired.

"Turn off the light," he ordered before he saw her hands were bound behind her. As he leapt for the switch himself, the shotgun roared again and a corner of the window was demolished as pellets peppered the far wall and ceiling.

In the darkness, he ripped off the tape over Kate's mouth, ignoring her gasp of pain.

"How many are there?" he asked.

"Five—maybe six," she said. "I'm sorry, Michael, I haven't had much chance to count."

Shayne nudged the shirtsleeved body by the windowsill with his toe, said, "If there were six, there are three left. And we still have five bolts to go."

Three down, three to go—the detective hoped there were no more. It was bound to be a close thing as it was.

But apparently the gunfire had been heard. In the distance, faint sounds of approaching sirens could be heard. The voice of the man downstairs called Frank and Dave back to the house. Shayne stationed himself at the room's door and

opened it, using its shelter to cover the staircase in front of him.

"Time to cut out," said the man in charge. "Let's go."

"What about the broad?" said Frank.

"She's bad news."

"What about Pete?"

"He's on his own. Let's go!"

Footsteps on wood faded, to be picked up again as the fleeing trio pounded along a short jetty. Moments later, a marine engine sputtered, then roared into life. Shayne unfettered Kate and led her downstairs, crossbow at the ready. The actress regarded him thoughtfully, rubbing her hands over her lower face where the tape had been applied.

"How in hell did you do it?" She asked him. He held up the crossbow, and she said, "Oh!"

"There's plenty still to do," he replied. He looked around at the furniture. There was a lot of it, all covered with dustcloths. He lifted the corner of a chair cover, frowned at what lay beneath, then lifted another, and a third.

Suddenly a telephone rang. Following the sound, he discovered the instrument in a wall cabinet, picked up the handset, listened to the voice that came over, said. "I've been expecting to hear from you, Lansing. It's all over. Listen . . ."

He held the phone clear of his face so that the caller could hear the sounds of the sirens, which were growling and wailing to a halt at the entrance to the trail from the rutted road beyond the palms where Pete Bonney lay face down in the ditch.

Outside, the *cup-cup-cup* of a helicopter was plainly audible and a searchlight from the sky circled and caught and held the three unhappy men in a boat attempting to flee the scene.

"*Lansing!*" Kate gasped. "Harry Lansing?"

Shayne tossed back a couch cover—to reveal an exquisite Louis XV love seat beneath. Other magnificent antiques lay beneath other covers. A cigaret hole had been burned in a table cover, leaving an ugly scar on the inlaid satinwood surface under it.

"This is no hunting lodge. This is a storehouse," said the actress, indicating the air-conditioning vents close to the ceiling. "Poor bastard—I wonder what drove him to it."

"Greed," said Shayne. "Probably plus the little man's congenital drive for power." He paused, added, "I wouldn't feel too sorry for him, Kate. Margot was murdered this afternoon."

"Oh, *no!*" The actress sank into a chair, chalk-white beneath her freckles. "And all be-

cause I had to get self-righteous over that damned bike. I'll never forgive myself."

Later, when the excitement was over, Walker Gibbs and Shayne had a quiet drink together in one of Miami's most respectable hotel restaurants, Gibbs asked, "Shayne, what in hell put you onto him? We didn't have an inkling."

"Call it negative reasoning if you want," said the redhead. "But there was a central hole in the case that wouldn't be filled any other way. Whoever kidnapped Kate had to know she was using the shack that night. Whoever kidnapped Kate had to know about the stolen bicycle. Whoever kidnapped Kate had to be desperate enough to take the chance in order to get Enzo Sarafin off his tail. Whoever had to get Sarafin off his tail had to be involved in the big fencing conspiracy. Whoever ran that had to know furniture—antique furniture."

"You make it sound simple, Shayne. But when did you *really* get onto him?"

"When I pulled back those covers at the lodge," the detective admitted. "It came together then." A pause, then, "I hope you've got a case against him?"

"Once we knew where to look, we really dug into his record. He never served time be-

fore but he's been mixed up in a dozen or more furniture rackets under a number of aliases. Even without that, we can nail him for his wife's murder. Lansing got Mick Bolanski to hire a hit man for that. Mike's the one the crew thought was their chief."

"And used Stanely Kronkheit for his alibi," said the redhead. "You got the hit man?"

"We've got him," said the F.B.I. man. "Bolanski talked.

Hell, they're *all* talking. Shayne, I don't know what the Bureau can do for you, but you've cleaned up a big one for us and I, for one, won't forget it."

Then, as the detective rose from their table, "Hey, where are you going?"

"I've got to pick up my secretary and take her to watch Kate rehearse for the new movie. If I don't, my life isn't going to be worth a damn."

In the Next Issue—

BRONZE STATUE MURDERS

A Thrilling New Mike Shayne Complete Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The statue itself didn't look like much—just a pint-sized piece of antique bronze that would not fill a wall safe. But it was worth one million dollars on the hoof to any collector who had the cash on hand to pay for it. Three groups of buyers had the money ready, but understandably they wanted to be sure that the statue they bought was authentic. When it turned out the figure for sale was a low-grade modern forgery, there was hell to pay—and it was the redhead's assignment to recover the real statue and complete the sale.

**The minister praised Stella
for helping the sick, but he
little knew how she helped.**

CHURCH WORK

by DONALD SMYTH

THE MINISTER GRIPPED the pulpit and scanned the packed church, row by row, face by face. Finally, his eyes fixed on a frail gray-haired woman who wore a long dark dress and a small black hat. Their eyes locked for a long time, and then the minister spoke.

"This morning is going to be a most unusual service," the minister started, his booming baritone voice carrying to the wooden rafters. "Because today we are going to honor the work of a most unusual person—a member of our congregation who gives so much of herself, night and day, to help others."

The pastor paused and looked into the expectant eyes of vari-



ous members of the congrega-
tion.

"I am speaking of Stella
White."

He explained that, when fate calls, as it does so often, Stella White went to the bedside of elderly brothers and sisters who were shut in and too ill and weak to care for themselves.

"She brings a measure of comfort to their failing lives," the Reverend Michaels said. "So this morning I am going to lay aside the Good Book and preach on the humanitarian work of this selfless woman and the meaning it carries in all our lives."

Everybody in the congregation strained to get a look at Stella White. She sat erect, motionless on the wooden bench beside Cecil, her husband of forty years.

Reverend Michaels' deep voice continued, "And this good woman, who told me she wanted to devote her remaining years to church work, to the work of God, *volunteered* to make these mercy visits to the homes of the infirm, the halt and the lame. Like a member of the family, she stays with the ailing until 'God's Will is done'. Then, quietly, without fanfare, she moves on to help someone else, another human in distress."

Stella's husband reached over and gripped her tiny pale hand. A twinkle came to her gray eyes. Then she recalled the countless elderly parishoners

she'd visited, sometimes in the ebony of night, over the past five years. Five rewarding years, she thought. Her thin mouth curled in a soft smile, the smile many elderly invalids had come to know before passing on to the Hereafter.

As the minister's praise continued, she remembered all those fellow churchgoers she'd seen pass on to the dark beyond. There were Sara Mullins, who had a bad kidney ailment, George Staten, who had a weak heart, Everett Wilson who had a liver disease, Ella Snodgrass, who had hypertension, failing kidneys and a bad heart. A tear trickled down Stella's sallow face.

Finally, she remembered Early Davenport. His death, just last week, was freshest in her mind. He'd suffered so very much.

She closed her eyes.

Stella could see the pale gray figure lying motionless in the hot room, a hull of the huge man Early Davenport was a few years ago. His head propped up on a white pillow, he stared out the window into the still night.

Stella stood at his side, fanning him gently. She turned to the old man's crippled wife and said, "Now Emily, don't you worry. We're doing all we can for him. Now we have to wait

on God's Will. *He's* the final judge in these matters."

The wrinkled woman nodded weakly from her wheelchair.

Shortly, Mrs. Davenport's eyes closed and Stella wheeled the old woman into another bedroom and, with much effort, managed to lift her arthritic frame into bed.

"Now sleep well, Emily. God's Will works in mysterious ways."

Back at Mr. Davenport's bedside, she heard him groan, "Oh...oh...oh...my head! Hurts...oh...oh...oh!"

Slowly, he lifted a shriveled hand and rubbed the back of his head. Stella knew his blood pressure was dangerously high. She'd watched the symptoms often enough. Splitting ache at the back of the head and endless sleeping. Of course, the pneumonia caused sleepiness, too, she surmised.

The grandfather clock in the dining room stroked midnight and Stella peered at the medicine on the dresser. This was the nurse's day off and Stella hadn't given him a pill to control his blood pressure all day. What with the complications of pneumonia, she sensed the end was near.

She picked up the pill container, walked over to the window and hurled it out into the darkness. The old man watched

the whole episode. He flinched and tried, vainly, to lift his wracked body, but fell back weakly.

Stella grasped a pair of scissors and edged toward him. She stopped three steps from his bed, the scissors lifted high above her head. Her lips curled into a smile, the smile so many of the infirm had come to know over the years.

Suddenly, the old man grabbed his head and moaned. Shortly, he was motionless, dead of a stroke. She promptly notified Mr. Davenport's two grown sons of their father's death and then, after staying long enough to console the family and call a hearse for them, she left. The family thanked her.

Heavy silence filled the church as Stella's husband tugged gently at her frail arm. His soft voice halted her racing mind.

"Stella, Stella, the Reverend Michaels wants you to stand up and be recognized. Please stand."

"Oh, yes, of course," she said, rising slowly. Stella was a very shy person, so she felt uncomfortable with every eye in the congregation focused on her. She shook her long dark dress and hoped it looked neat after sitting there for so long through the minister's sermon.

Slowly, Stella looked around the church and nodded as she recognized face after face in the packed auditorium.

After the service, the minister stopped in the aisle where the Whites sat. He invited Stella to stand beside him near the church's big oaken door and greet congregation members as they departed. Her husband stood next to her, silent, merely nodding to the parishoners as they walked by.

Just as the minister shook her frail hand, thinking the church had emptied, a big strapping man wheeled Emily Davenport up the center aisle to the vestibule leading outside. The withered woman's eyes lit up. She tried to speed up the wheelchair by turning its wheels with her distorted hands.

"Oh, Stella, we're so *proud* of you," she said in a weak voice. "I know Early Davenport would have liked to be here this morning. He thought the world of you. And all of us are so

grateful for the long hours you stayed at his bedside, helping comfort him toward the end of his life. So thoughtful."

Stella wiped away a tear and forced a smile. "Emily, thank you! It's so good to see you. I'm pleased to have helped Mr. Davenport in some small way."

Burl Davenport, the eldest son of the deceased man, clumsily hugged Stella. Tears welled up in his eyes. Then he gripped Mr. White's hand and said, "Both of you have been great. Just great. That was such a beautiful funeral. Daddy deserved the very best and he got it."

Shortly, the Whites nodded at the Davenports and at the minister. Then they walked down the concrete steps and slid into a dark limousine. A small silver plate on the side of the vehicle was emblazoned with the words *White Funeral Home*. They waved back as they cruised off down the tree-lined street in the soft summer sunlight.



NEXT MONTH: A TRULY BRILLIANT NEW STORY

By JERRY JACOBSON

The Mourning After

by JAMES McKIMMEY

In Nevada, the house gambler is supposed to win. But even before the girl came, Burt Rifkin was a loser—right down the line.



I'D LIKE TO DENY that I'm a loser—very much I'd like that. But as I write this, I'm aware of the shadows of bars falling on the paper. I'd also like to deny that I was led gently down the path to disaster by a beautiful face and the equally beautiful body that went with

it. I mean, like on the late, late show: *Double Indemnity* and Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyk and all they got into? Wow!

But then why am I *here*, right? Because I certainly can't deny I'm *in* this county jail, so why should I try to deny anything?

I'll just try to explain how it happened, in case anyone's interested in how one 31-year-old ex-dealer of blackjack got himself into the old vise, and I mean with it clamped all the way shut.

It started at Lake Tahoe, in a crummy bar. Oh, not a gambling club, like a couple down the street—I was eighty-sixed out of those. It had been a small matter of crossroading with some cowboy who talked me into it because I was dealing cards in one of those clubs.

Then, when I was bounced for it—they didn't have enough proof to prosecute, but they knew I'd been paying off too heavily on bets the cowboy won—I went over to another casino to wash my grief with brandy. And wound up ripping out the bar's mixing machine and throwing it through a window. I don't usually demonstrate such senseless violence, but I'd enjoyed my job and regretted losing it.

So there I was, the next

night, jobless, with an 86 to track my employment record in Nevada, along with a JD record, sitting in this small cocktail lounge, on the sauce again. Winter and it was slow. There was a bartender who didn't like talking to customers, which was fine with me. A couple of other guys. Then this girl walked in. And that's when it all began toward this, what I've got now.

Oh, lord, she looked beautiful! Hair the color of light wine. A delicate face with perfect features. She took off her coat as she came in and moved down along the bar, where she sat down four stools away. Even slacks and sweater—good ones, I saw—looked luscious on that body.

She lit a cigaret, ordered a drink, then sat there, smoking and sipping, not looking around, just staring straight ahead across the bar into the mirror there—at herself, I thought. Until I looked at that same mirror, at her reflection, seeing that she was gazing directly at me, giving me a small, sweet smile.

Well, now, I'm not a bad-looking fellow. But I'm no Redford-Newman combination either. I've never had a lot of trouble getting girls, but then they've always been the same kind. And this one, looking at

me through the mirror, didn't look like that, didn't look like that at all.

So I didn't know why she'd given me that smile, and I decided to try to find out. I signaled to the bartender and quietly told him to ask her if I could buy her a drink. Surly type that he was, he smirked and moved down bar to ask the lady.

I clearly heard her say, "How nice!"

I couldn't believe it. But that didn't stop me from immediately moving to sit next to her, while the bartender, looking grim again, mixed new drinks for both of us.

"Good evening," I said. "I'm Burt Rifkin."

"Well, good evening," she said, her voice softly husky. "And I'm Sherry Russell."

As simple as that. Minutes later we were sitting in a booth, chatting away, measuring each other, both of us enjoying it.

I thought . . .

"You work some place around here?" I asked.

She shook her head, fine wine-tinted hair swinging with the movement. "I did, in Reno. Cocktails." She named a casino I'd never been in. "But—"

"Yeah," I said. "Hard times." She didn't look like hard times. But Northern Nevada, in

winter, in this economy, was a tough place to find a job.

"You?"

"I dealt. Down the street. The Sierra Casino."

"No more?"

"I'll get something else. Soon." A lie. Not with the record I had now. Just thinking of that was depressing, because I didn't know remotely what I was going to do when the unemployment ran out.

"What's that Marquart like?" she asked.

Laurence Marquart owned the Sierra Casino, and discussing personnel of casino operations was common among employees—or ex-employees. Maybe actors talk about directors and producers the same way—I don't know. I shook my head. "I never met him."

"He married that performer, what's-her-name."

"Yeah, and a lot of others, including his current."

"And you never met him?" she asked.

"Never saw him." Howard Hughes didn't own an exclusive on that. When you operate a large gambling store, you have losers. Some of them take it hard. Some of them go looking for revenge. So most owners stay in the shadows and hire other people to do the customer-relations bit.

"I guess he's in kind of a feud

with whoever owns the club across the street, huh?"

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "The Mountain Club. Big vicious competition, going for high stakes, every day, every night." It was the club where I'd been banned for throwing the mixer.

"Who owns that one?"

"An organization. I don't know who actually runs it."

"Well—" She smiled that small, sweet smile, and her eyes—a deep and lovely brown—played with my emotions. "To heck with them right now, right?"

"Right," I said.

"Let's just think about us."

"That's where it ought to be." I reached across the table and took her hand, and she squeezed back. Incredible! I'd had dreams about something like this. But this was real. "Another drink?"

She shook her head, with her wine hair swinging.

"What then?"

"Why don't you take me home?"

That's how it started. And that's how it went. She didn't talk about money, big money and how she wanted it badly, for a time. We just had fun. She'd just rented a small apartment at Tahoe and knew how to cook. I was there a lot. Then we'd done the inexpensive things you can do in the area.

Sit on a deck and watch them ski down from the higher slopes. Walk in the snow. Nurse a beer and catch a lounge act for nothing—but never in the Sierra Casino or Mountain Club where I was eighty-sixed.

I had to tell her about that, of course, because she suggested, one day, that we go into one of them. And I decided to be honest about it. We were in her apartment at the time, and I said, simply, "I got stupid. I set it up with another guy, me dealing, him playing. I overpaid the bets every now and then—we were going to split the profits later. Penny ante.

"But the man behind the mirrors in the ceiling caught it. Out I went. I was a little gloomy. So I crossed the street to the Mountain Club, drank a touch too much and took one of those electric mixers, like they fix the fancy drinks in, and yanked it loose and sent it through a window. End of that place as well."

"My goodness!" she said. "You don't look like a person who'd do anything like that. Have you, often?"

I shrugged. "Not very often. But when I have—"

"Have you ever hurt anyone?"

"Ah, well—a couple of times

maybe, when I was younger."

"I like tough guys," she said, whispering, looking at me that way she had with the deep brown eyes.

"I'm not so tough," I said.

"Enough for me," she said. "Hurry up—let's kiss."

AS THE DAYS PASSED, I relished the entire thing. She could have had her choice, but the choice was me. And I didn't really know why, except for a basic physical attraction—although she seemed to enjoy just being with me, doing whatever it was we were doing. And so I began taking it more and more for granted, lulled by the pleasure of it all.

I didn't suspect anything, not a thing, when she became very sober one day, sitting beside me on one of those ski-resort decks, wearing beautiful ski clothes, her lovely eyes behind mirrored sun glasses.

She said, carefully, "Burt, the craziest thing happened. Last night. After you left."

"Like what?"

"This guy showed up."

I studied her carefully, we'd never made any verbal commitments, but I'd thought I was the only male she was seeing.

"No," she said, reading my mind. "Nothing like that. It was somebody I worked with in

Reno. We just got to be buddies, you know? He dealt craps. Sometimes, when we got off duty, we'd have a drink together. Very platonic. He'd tell me his problems, and I'd listen. I felt sorry for him, I guess, because so many things bothered him, even though they weren't all that serious. I was some sort of mother image for him, I guess."

I nodded, but I couldn't imagine any man over 18 looking at this girl as a mother image. You'd have to have a few cards missing from your deck to manage that. "So he showed up to tell you his problems again?"

In the reflection of her glasses, I watched a skier bulleting down the slope, but I couldn't see the expression of her eyes. "One big problem."

"Like?"

"I couldn't believe it. He was fairly juiced, so I thought maybe he was just imagining things. But after I slept on it, I think maybe he was telling the truth."

"About what?"

"A guy tried to hire him to kill somebody."

Another skier swung into a stop at the bottom of the run, snow flying from his skis. "How come? I mean him? He can't have anything more than a juvenile record, or he couldn't work in the casino. So—"

"But that was it. He doesn't have anything in his background that's remotely criminal. That's why he was chosen. No motive, see? Except—"

"Go ahead."

"Well, he was offered money—an awful lot of money. He even told me who it was who made the offer. Just the name of the guy—I told you he was kind of bombed, and I guess that's why he did. He doesn't know the man very well, just as a high-roller who's played his table. I remember him, too."

"Did he say who the hit was going to be?"

She shook her head. "Just somebody very important."

"I don't get it. If the man makes the kind of money it takes to be a high-roller, he must be smart enough to realize that making an offer like that could get him into all kinds of trouble. What if your friend told somebody else about it, like he did you? Say the police?"

"The man said he'd deny it. And he told my friend not to try that anyway or he'd get hurt. Badly."

"Is your friend going to do it?"

"He said he gets sick killing a fly. He said it was ridiculous."

"What was the name of the man who made the offer?"

She shook her head again. "No."

"Why not?"

He's got to be mixed up in something bad. Syndicate or something. I don't want you to know—that way you can't get in trouble."

"But *you* know, Sherry. And—"

"Let's not talk about it anymore, Burt. It's weird. It's not fun."

But she brought it up again, days later, while we were having breakfast at her place. And she said, looking as delicious in the morning as she did at any other time, "I've thought about that offer my friend got, Burt."

"*Thought* about it?" I repeated, puzzled.

"And I did something about it, too. I checked with a couple of my girlfriends in Reno who still work in the club. I asked them if they could find out where the man who made the offer lived. One of them did. He has a suite in a hotel down there."

"Okay," I said. "But why?"

She propped her elbows on the table and fitted her palms under her chin, looking pensive, dreamy. "I always wanted to have money. An awful lot of money. And I never have. I want it now, Burt."

"But—" I stopped right there. "I didn't tell you how much that offer was, did I? Or how it was going to be worked? Well, it was for fifty thousand, ten before, the balance after. What do you think of that? Isn't fifty thousand dollars a lot of money, Burt? Isn't it?"

I blinked. "Yeah."

"And all my friend had to do was get a pistol somewhere, be told the place where the man he was to kill would be alone, the time to do it—then go there and get the job done. That's all."

I watched her, beginning to follow her direction now. "So what have you got in mind?"

"I could call the man, at his hotel. I wouldn't have to identify myself. I'd ask him if he still wanted the job done. If he did, I'd tell him I knew how to do it. He could send the ten thousand to a phoney name care of general delivery at one of the post offices up here. Then—"

"Who's going to do that job?" I asked, hearing a coldness going into the tone of my voice.

She waited a few moments, then she said, "You, Burt?"

I stopped eating.

"Could you?" she asked. "Could you do that for fifty thousand? Kill somebody you don't know? Burt?"

I drank some coffee, then I

said, "If he went for it, what's to keep him from not sending us the balance?"

"I've thought about that, too. So. I know who he is. My dealer friend knows. That's two. And we could threaten him with that—that's a double threat he'd pay attention to, isn't it? And he *must* have a motive, mustn't he? So I could tell him that if he was turned in, they'd find that motive. Burt? Could you do it?"

I sat thinking. And she began talking about all the places we could go together, and what we could do with that kind of money. Finally I said, honestly, "I don't know."

She nodded, smiling now. "Then think about it. And make up your mind. But right now . . ." She got up and took my hand—and led me back to paradise.

After that, I'd made up my mind.

I could do it.

SHE MADE THE CALL from a public booth while I waited in my beat-up sedan. And I was beginning to have doubts about the man she was phoning ever going through with it. He was dealing with someone he could not identify—although Sherry had insisted that was his advantage. But the \$10,000—why would he risk mailing that to

someone who might just keep it and never do what he'd been paid to do?

But then Sherry was hurrying back to the car, looking joyful. She got in, saying, "He went for it. All the way. He'll mail the money today and we should get it tomorrow. I told him to send it to Rex Brown, general delivery, Zephyr Cove Post Office. He'll also mail the home address of the man he wants . . . gotten rid of. With instructions about when to do it and directions for getting it done. He'll send a key, too." She was truly glowing.

I sat there, nodding, realizing that it was going to come true, after all. The bad luck that had followed me like a shadow all of my life was going to fly away now.

"What about a pistol?" she asked anxiously.

"I've got one."

"But would you dare use it? If it's registered—"

"It isn't. It isn't on any sort of record. My old man took it off a dead German during World War Two and brought it home in his duffle bag. He didn't declare it, and he said they never went through those bags.

"That's good," she whispered. "That's wonderful."

"I don't want to get involved with a silencer. The pistol's a small Walther and if I'm inside

and the neighbors aren't too close, it won't make that much noise. I'm good with it, too."

"You're wonderful, Burt."

"We won't use this car to get there. I'll take one from a casino parking lot. People with their minds on gambling are always leaving their keys in the ignition. And if I don't find one of those, I know how to get into a car and start the engine anyway—I got enough experience when I was a kid."

"It's perfect," she said, moving over to me. "It's going to work just beautifully."

We drove over to the Zephyr Cove P.O. the next morning, and I went in and claimed the package. Then we drove on to a place called Cave Rock, where you can park right by the lake—there was only one other car, and its driver was busy fishing for trout. I opened the package with Sherry watching intently.

Inside was a collection of \$100 bills banded together. I gave them to Sherry and asked her to start counting. As she did that, I held the key that was included and read a neatly-typed letter—unsigned, naturally—detailing what I was to do.

The house was not far from where we were parked—a couple of miles back down the highway—which meant it was expensive. The letter told me to

go there at 10 P.M. Thursday night, when the maid would be gone—that meant that the next night I'd be doing this. It told me how to move into the house from the back and described how to go through the interior to the study where the subject always read alone at that time.

The rest was up left entirely to me.

"Ten thousand," Sherry said, glowing again. "Exactly."

The next night, equipped with the pistol, I drove Sherry to one of the casino lots—she had the ten grand in her purse. In case anything went wrong and we had to leave the area in a hurry, we wanted that money with us. Then, between security patrols, we left my car and went looking for a key in an ignition. We found one in a fairly new blue sedan—people just can't wait to get inside those casinos, and that's all they're thinking about at the time.

I drove out of the lot and down the highway in the direction of the house I'd be entering. I'd checked it out the day before, after reading the letter. It was large and expensive, as all of them were in that area. Happily, they were well spaced from each other. Sherry had asked if she had to go in with me tonight and watch. And I'd told her no, all she had to do

was wait in the stolen car and be ready to take off when I got back.

I stopped a mile short of the target and parked in a grove of trees, hoping that whoever owned the car we were in stayed put in that casino until this was done. We waited until ten of ten. Then I drove on again and into the development where the house was. I stopped a block away and kissed Sherry, beginning to feel my heart pumping. I reviewed the instructions in the letter, using a small pen-type flash, then stuffed the letter into a pocket of my jacket. I got out as she slid behind the wheel.

"Good luck, darling," she whispered.

I nodded, then hurried in the direction of the house. There was no moonlight and very little street lighting, and I felt secure about not being seen—or if I were, not well enough to identify me later. I arrived at the house, broke into a run and went along the side to the back, getting out the key as I did. I tried it on the lock of the door there, opened it and went in silently.

I went through an anteroom, then a kitchen, then along a hall where light came from a partly-open door three rooms ahead. That was the room. I went toward it on a thick rug

making no sound, taking the pistol from a pocket.

Then I was there and looking in, seeing a balding man with thick shoulders seated in a leather chair with a book in hand and a drink on a table beside him.

I swung the door open all the way and stepped in, and he looked up, eyes growing wide.

"No!" he said.

I began working the trigger. Small pistols are very difficult to handle with accuracy, but I'd been target shooting with this one most of my life. I was accurate.

I shoved the gun back into the pocket and went out the same way I'd come in, fast. I returned along the side of the house, then trotted the block necessary to reach Sherry and the stolen car.

When I was nearly there, I saw they were gone.

I had to keep moving, on foot, and I did, feeling rage burning inside me. I was furious at her, furious at myself. Because I understood it all now, every bit, and the bad luck was on me again. Still, I'd partially asked for it. I'd gotten too hungry for Sherry, then for the money—so I hadn't seen any of it coming. But she'd done it perfectly . . .

It was four miles back to that parking lot where I'd left my car. And I wondered where she

would dump the one we'd stolen. It didn't matter, I decided, hiking through the night. It didn't matter at all now.

I finally got back to the lot and my car, then drove away, heading for her apartment, I don't know why. I knew she wouldn't be there, would never be there again. And she wasn't.

Sitting outside of her place in my car, I tried to think what to do. There was nothing, I decided, not one damned thing. As soon as the murder was announced on the news, all she had to do was phone the man in Reno who'd hired it done and ask him to send the balance of the money to another phoney name at any post office she chose.

I couldn't make that call, because I didn't know who he was. And if I tried to find the craps dealer she'd known who'd given that name to her, and extract it out of him, it wouldn't be soon enough to make my own pitch for the rest of the money. Besides I'd be implicating myself.

No, she'd taken me all the way down the line. I'd never see her again. Or the money. I simply had to live with that.

So I went home to my apartment and chose the only logical course for a man who'd gotten himself into my situation: I started drinking.

Over coffee the next morning, grim with hangover and thoughts of what Sherry had done to me, I found out, over the radio, who I'd killed. His maid had found him where I'd left him.

His name was Paul Angel. He was a part of the organization that ran the Mountain Club, where I'd thrown the bar mixer through a window. He was believed to be the top man in charge of that casino's operation. The initial conjecture was that there had been some sort of grudge motivation for the murder, within the gambling industry.

I shook my head. Even though I'd shot him, I didn't know the motivation or who was responsible for it. All I'd done was the job itself.

Now, in the cold, head-hurting light of a new day, I was beginning to worry about that. I kept remembering my journey from the stolen car to Angel's back door. Could someone, despite the lack of light, have seen me? And the return to find the car and Sherry gone, then leaving the area on foot? Had someone seen me at any of those times and then, once the murder was known, given my description to the authorities?

Then Sherry. Had *she* been seen parked where I'd left her? And what if an early report had

been given the sheriff's office about that stolen car? And what if she'd been picked up driving it after she'd abandoned me—with ten thousand on her that she couldn't explain? Would she involve me, in that event? If not now, eventually?

I had no answers to anything. I didn't want to leave my apartment. But I needed food and drink. So I went out to the nearest grocery, stocked up and returned to my place to stay there, with the apprehension mounting every hour.

Then, the following morning, I learned, again from the radio, about a second murder. Lawrence Marquart, owner of the casino where I'd been fired as a dealer, had also been shot and killed in *his* home. There were no specific suspects, no leads of any kind. But this time the conjecture was that the act was revenge for the killing of Paul Angel, Marquart's rival.

I decided that was indeed fact. The organization that had been headed by Angel had simply hired a hit man in retaliation for the murder I'd committed.

I'd had nothing whatever to do with any kind of feud between the two men. But I was as guilty of murder as the professional hit man. And just as vulnerable to discovery, if not a lot more so. Unless . . .

That was when I got the idea of what I was going to do, to get myself out of the trouble I was in.

I waited until the *Daily Tribune* came out that day, bought a copy and brought it home to read the story of Laurence Marquart's death. His wife had discovered the body in the office he used at home. Again there was the conjecture of revenge in the industry. Included in the story were details of his final arrangements, which would be handled by the Sky Mortuary. Friends and relatives could visit the mortuary the following day. Burial would be the day after that.

Now I knew exactly what I was going to try. I'd been led long enough; now it was time to start using my own head and get that killing off my back . . .

I MADE IT THROUGH to the next day. Then, dressed in slacks and turtleneck, I wiped my pistol meticulously clean, slipped on thin leather gloves and tucked the gun under my belt. I put on a parka and left the apartment.

I drove to the Sky Mortuary area and parked a half block away. There was no great collection of cars in the place's parking lot—when you were in the position Laurence Marquart had been, perhaps you didn't

make many friends who cared to pay their last respects. But there were two large black sedans there, and I figured they were being used by the men who formed Marquart's top brass at the Sierra Casino.

Minutes later they trooped out, and I recognized all of them. I waited a little longer, until after they'd driven away. Then I got out of the car and walked to the mortuary, hoping there was no one in the chapel now, including his wife.

I went into a small lobby; and I could see, sitting in the rear pew of the chapel beyond, a small, insignificant-looking man with very short hair. But I couldn't see the entire chapel until I got in there. Then I saw one other person. She was kneeling beside the open coffin, wearing a black dress, with her back to me. I couldn't believe it.

It was Sherry.

I forgot the nothing guy in the back row and walked on up to the coffin. "Hello, Sherry," I said softly.

She turned her head and looked up. She stared at me for several seconds, and I saw hate in those eyes I'd once thought were so lovely. *Then it came to me, all at once, just what had happened and why.*

She stood up slowly, still hating me with those brown eyes, her mouth curling bitterly.

"That whole story of yours," I said, just above a whisper, "was a lie. The dealer in Reno being offered the job to get rid of Paul Angel by the high-roller? Fiction, right? It was really Marquart behind it, wasn't it?" I nodded toward the aquiline features of the corpse lying with his hands crossed over his chest.

"He was married to someone else, but you were his girl, weren't you?"

I managed a bitter smile, thinking that I had indeed been dumb—a girl like this falling for me the way it happened? I should have read it out from the instant it started.

"He's the one who sent the ten grand through the mail, true?" I went on. "And the letter? And key? And so he's the one who set up the whole thing in the first place by sending you to do the job on me."

Oh, yeah, I thought. I was perfect for it. I'd been fired from his club for cheating, and he was probably looking for a recent dismissal like that—someone who'd need money and would do most anything to get it. Then I'd shown a little violence across the street in the Mountain Club, and he would have found out about that. So I was it, to get rid of Paul Angel, Marquart's hated rival.

"Did he let you keep the

money, Sherry?" I asked sarcastically.

"How did you find out about him and me?" Her tone was softly vicious.

"I just figured it out. Right here. Just now."

"Oh, no!" she said, hair swinging. "Some other way. You *had* to. *Days* ago. And that's why you killed him, wasn't it? When you found out I was his girl, you figured out the rest of it. And you crept into his house, you creep, and shot him to death, just like you did Paul Angel."

I was hearing her. But I was positive the guy in the back row couldn't. I shook my head. "You're crazy, Sherry. I didn't kill Marquart."

"You *did*," she insisted, her eyes wild now. "And now you'd better kill me, too. *Or I'm going to destroy you!*" Then she turned back to the coffin, staring at the dead man, tears trickling down her cheeks, whispering, "I loved him. Dear God, how I did!"

Finally she wheeled around and left the chapel.

After she had, I kept my back toward the guy in the rear, figuring he was probably a poor uncle hoping Marquart had left him something, keeping up a stubborn vigil. I knew, regardless of his presence, that I was still going to do what I'd plan-

ned. I had even more reason now.

I undid a button of the parka and carefully pulled the pistol from under my belt, staring at the dead man in the coffin. Had he been right-handed or left-handed? He was still wearing an expensive digital watch on one wrist—the left one. So he'd been right-handed, I decided with certainty.

I glanced back. Then I fitted the pistol into that right hand. And it was easy, with him stiff like that. I had to use both hands to squeeze his fingers around that handle. But I got it done and the pistol back under my belt certain that the inconspicuous guy in the rear had detected nothing of my actions in getting Marquart's fingerprints on the gun that killed his enemy, Paul Angel.

I DROVE HOME and fitted the pistol into a plastic bag, being very careful not to blur the prints now on it, just as I had been getting it here. Then I put the pistol into an old box. All of this wearing the gloves.

I left and drove to a deserted area on Kingsbury Grade. I stopped there and carried the box to a particularly large boulder I'd noticed before. People had painted or carved their names and initials on its face. I put the box behind it,

out of sight, and went back to town.

From a booth, I called the sheriff's sub-station at Zephyr Cove. A woman answered, and I told her abruptly to take the message and get it right. "The pistol Laurence Marquart used to kill Paul Angel is on Kingsbury Grade." Then I described exactly how to find it and hung up.

I found a bar after that and had a few drinks, feeling very good now. I remembered well enough Sherry's threat just before she left the mortuary. But what could she do now? I'd figured out the way to go, had done it, and now I was safe.

When I finally went home, I found them waiting for me in the hallway of my apartment building.

One was the insignificant-looking guy with the close-cropped hair who'd been in the rear pew of the mortuary's chapel; his ID identified him as Sheriff's Detective Alfred Nolz. With him was a uniformed deputy.

They had a warrant for my arrest. So they searched me and then walked me up to my apartment, where Nolz delivered the news of why they were there with all the warmth of a doberman pincher.

Sherry had gone directly to the sheriff's sub-station from

the mortuary. She'd told them she'd been Laurence Marquart's girl, but she also said she'd gotten into a foolish side affair with me. It had gone on for a time, and they could check that—we'd been seen together here and there, including at her place. Then she'd finally admitted it to Marquart. He'd demanded that I see him.

I'd gone to him, she said, and then, later, told her on the phone that Marquart had threatened me with either doing something he wanted—killing someone for him for a certain amount of money—or he would put all his muscle on me to my great regret. I had then, she said, obviously killed Paul Angel, the man Marquart most wanted to see die. After that, I'd returned to Marquart, who refused to pay me the money he'd promised. So I'd shot him. She informed the sheriff's people that I'd told her the last at the mortuary.

I insisted, and loudly, that it was nothing like that, not remotely!

But Nolz failed to listen and went on, saying that he'd been informed at the mortuary that an anonymous phone call had come into his sub-station saying that the pistol used by Marquart to kill Paul Angel was behind a boulder on Kingsbury Grade. He'd left the

mortuary and picked up the pistol. They had Marquart's fingerprints on file, as they do everyone's who is involved in Nevada gaming. So they discovered the prints were his, all right. But there was one trouble. He had no use of his right hand, where the prints matched—a severed-nerve situation that few people knew about.

Nolz's eyes froze my spine—and I'd thought he was a nothing!

He told me he'd been sitting in that mortuary from the time it was open for viewing the body, looking for anything that might seem suspicious. So he knew that I was the only one who'd been in position to have gotten those prints off the dead man's hand. Moreover, why else was I there? I hadn't known Marquart.

I had nothing more to say to him.

So they searched the apartment and found, in the jacket I'd worn the night I'd killed Paul Angel, that crumpled letter giving me instructions about how to do it. I'd never once thought about that letter after I'd shot him. With Sherry running off like that? Drinking? Worrying? Trying to figure out how to protect myself? Why would I have thought about that?

They drove me to the sub-station in Zephyr Cove, booked me and sent me down here to the Carson Valley and the county jail, where I'm writing this.

This is a rotten jail. I see blood stains on the floor. It's depressing. And I've always hated not having my freedom.

But what's worse, my trial comes along soon. And they're going to find me guilty of two murders. I only committed *one* of them, for God's sake! But Sherry'll testify, spewing out the same lies she gave at the sub-station. Then they'll send me to the Maximum Security Division of the Nevada State Prison.

I'd rather stay here, even in

this place, because that is a very rough prison. And I've gotten a message about that. They arrested someone and put him in with me, here. And he delivered it.

Paul Angel's people are certain now that I killed Angel. Marquart's bunch think I killed Marquart. The word has been sent out that someone, some con, after I'm put into that state prison, is going to pay me off. I've already been tried, convicted and sentenced to death!

And now, with all of it done, I don't know anymore how it all came to this! Or why bad luck has *always* been running after me, ever since I was born! So that it all finally came to *this*!

I mean, *why me???*

COMING SOON:

a new mystery novelet—

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TOP BILLING

Harper's jealousy of his actress-wife led him inevitably to commission of an imperfect crime.

by MARILYN GRANBECK



CRAIG HARPER took a martini from the tray of a passing waiter and turned back to the bright ingenue who was trying to hold his attention. He smiled and nodded, but his eyes were on the two figures across the

room. Oliver Wells was bending close, whispering to Angela. Rage almost choked Craig as he watched his wife gaze at the young actor.

Did they have to flaunt their affair? Wasn't it enough that he

was tortured by it every waking moment of the day?

Craig Harper's newest hit, *Magic*, had finished its third record-breaking month. And a good part of it was due to Oliver Wells. Wells had been discovered by Gina Holliday, a drama coach with a reputation for success with handsome young actors.

She'd found George Olenka working as an elevator repairman in this building where she had her studio. She dug the grease from under his fingernails, planted and cultivated his innocent expression, taught him acting and changed his name to Oliver Wells. A star was manufactured.

Wells had talent. When he read for *Magic*, Craig spotted it immediately. The kid was exactly right for the young lover. Oliver was the closest thing to a matinée idol to come to Broadway in a long time.

He was great—except for one thing. Angela had the lead and Oliver Wells found her too tempting to keep the romance on stage where it belonged.

Angela was twenty years younger than Craig. It had been a constant source of wonder to him that she'd accepted his proposal of marriage. They'd met while she was reading for a bit part in one of his plays. She had adequate talent

onstage as long as she had strong supporting players to bolster her—but she had more than adequate talent offstage.

She and Craig had been married two weeks later. In the next three years, Craig had seen to it that his wife went from occasional walk-ons to top billing. In his eyes, she was perfect—or had been until Oliver Wells came along.

By the time the show opened, Craig knew he had a box office hit. He knew also he was losing his most precious possession—Angela. His suspicions had grown to certainty. The stage romance was only a prelude to the real one that took place after the curtain came down.

Craig saw the glances between them, the quick touch of hands as they parted and went to their dressing rooms. Angela had appointments whenever the theater was dark—an old school friend in town for the day—shopping trips from which she came home empty handed—visits to relatives he was sure didn't exist.

Angela and Oliver were careful to keep the affair discreet, but that made it all the harder for Craig to bear. Each conversation that ended as he came near them, each sidelong glance between them, was a knife in the already festering wound of jealousy.

He *couldn't* let Angela go—and he *wouldn't* share her!

He'd wanted to skip Gina Holliday's studio party to celebrate the continuing success of the play and her protégé's stardom, but Angela had agreed too readily, insisting she *wouldn't* mind going alone.

But that would have given them the whole evening together.

Across the room, Angela's hand trailed on Oliver's sleeve as she turned and moved away from him. Craig excused himself and edged his bulk between a woman in gold lamé and a youth in tight jeans and a blue shirt. Wall-to-wall chatter and the clink of glasses filled the huge loft and echoed from the ceiling. Oliver Wells was staring out an open window at the lights of the city thirty stories below.

"Quite a view," Craig said.

Wells turned, a shadow of surprise crossing his face. He smiled and the publicity-shot innocence settled on his handsome features. "Hello Craig. Yes, it's great."

Craig steadied his martini glass with conscious effort. "Magic New York, city of lovers..."

His voice trembled with the anger and turmoil he felt. He searched Oliver's face for guilt but found only a mask of casual

boredom. The actor speared an olive from his glass with a plastic toothpick and chewed it slowly.

"Don't you have a line like that in the play?" Craig asked him.

"The magic moment we came together in this enchanted city. In the second act where you kiss Angela for the first time?" He couldn't keep the venom out of his voice.

"You know damned well I do," Oliver said. "You're the producer." His tone was tinged with sarcasm but his glance was amused.

Craig's hand shook and gin splashed over the rim of the glass. "How do you manage to make that kiss look so fresh every night? It must be hard not to pull my wife into your arms and kiss her the way you do when the two of you are alone."

Across the room, the piano came alive with the theme from *Magic*. Someone called to Oliver and he smiled and waved. To Craig, he said, "You're letting your imagination run away with you, old boy."

The patronizing familiarity detonated Craig's fury. "You bastard—leave her alone! I'm warning you—"

Wells laughed softly. "Your wife is faithful and devoted. I

heard you tell that to a columnist just last week. Surely you wouldn't lie about anything so sacred?"

Craig stared out the open window. The studio was hot and the breeze felt good on his flushed face. In the distance, the bridge and the river were a misty stage backdrop.

He took a deep breath. "I won't let her go, Wells. You can't give her the things she wants. You're years away from that kind of money. You're still a nobody on Broadway."

Oliver's brows lifted. "Not according to *Variety*, old boy. I'm a big box-office attraction. No matter what's up in lights, the public gives me top billing."

Craig had been forced to admit this truth to himself weeks ago, and it made his hatred of Wells stronger.

Oliver grinned and swirled the last drop in his empty glass. "Excuse me, I need a drink."

Craig forced him back toward the window. "All right. If I can't drop you from the play, I'm going to kill you," he said. He'd thought about it a lot but somehow it burst into words unexpectedly. He enjoyed the startled reaction on Oliver's face. "I'll make it look like an accident, of course," he added.

Wells tried to laugh. "You're kidding!"

"Am I?" The idea was taking full form.

Wells said, "If you kill me you'd be losing your star."

"Yes, but with such a tragic exit, public sympathy would help at the box office. They'd accept your stand-in." He'd thought about that too.

Oliver's face twisted in mockery. "How do you intend to pull off this marvelous bit of drama?"

Craig glanced past him at the open window. "It's a long way down."

Oliver almost turned but caught himself. "Oh, come on! You'll have to do better than that. There are more than a hundred people here. You aren't *that* crazy."

Craig gritted his teeth. "There are other times and other places."

Oliver shook his head. "You're ridiculous. You haven't got the nerve to do it. Besides, I can easily stay away from open windows and balconies." He stepped past Craig quickly. "I'll make sure you don't have any opportunities."

Craig watched the actor move toward the bar. For a moment before the throng blocked his view, Craig saw Angela turn and join her lover. Her hand touched Oliver's arm lightly—the way it used to touch his. Craig was blind with

fury. He *would* kill Oliver Wells—sometime, somewhere, *soon!* The thought of anyone touching Angela, making her smile that certain way, talking to her intimately—made him physically ill.

He began to push toward them. He wanted to get out of here, to go home where he could blot out all thoughts of Oliver Wells and prove his love to Angela again and again.

Gina Holliday caught his arm. "Darling, I've got some people you simply must meet." She dragged him toward a short man and an ugly woman near the piano. There faces and voices blurred as Craig mumbled excuses and got away.

Angela and Wells were near the door, leaning close in earnest conversation. When they saw him, Wells hurried from the studio.

Angela turned as Craig approached. Her eyes were bright and her face flushed. She smiled wearily. "Darling, I have a frightful headache. Do you think we can leave?"

He stared at her fragile beauty, the long golden hair piled atop her head, the shimmering green eyes.

"Of course, my dear." Had Wells run off, frightened, a coward when confronted by the truth? It didn't matter—not as long as Craig and Angela could

be alone. Maybe, if he talked to her, told her how much her career meant to him—and depended on him . . .

He steered Angela from the studio without goodbyes. In the dim hall, he pushed the elevator button and watched his wife as she stood with eyes closed and face twisted in pain. How lovely she was, but still so incredibly young and foolish.

She was not to blame for the affair with Wells. She was being used. He thought of the moment of fear in Oliver's eyes when he'd threatened to kill him, of the pleasure it had given him. Suddenly, he knew it was the answer. He *would* kill the bastard. With Oliver out of the way, he would forgive Angela and they'd start over.

Behind them, the noise of the party was muted in the empty building. The whirring of the elevator ceased and the doors slid open. Craig saw the yawning blackness. His first thought was that the light in the cage was out. But at the same instant, he heard the whisper of sound behind him and felt the powerful shove at his back.

He fell, twisting and clawing at the air as he glimpsed Oliver Wells, ex-elevator repairman, and the triumphant look on Angela's smiling face. The musty air of the shaft whistled in his ears. It was a long way down.

WHEELCHAIR MURDER

by FRANK SISK

A convalescent hospital is an unlikely place for a murder. But was Boris Malenov actually murdered—or was it accidental death?

IT WAS ONE of those uncompromising mornings in July—very hot, very humid. Humid enough, in the unspoken opinion of Captain Thomas McFate, to support tinker mackerel on Main street. The two-page memo, which Lieutenant Marcel Bergeron had just handed him, was already limp with absorbed moisture.

"What's the latest hype on the air conditioning?" he asked.

"Back in operation by noon, they say."

"If not," McFate said gruffly, "we'll have the grounds to charge the whole damned maintenance crew with malfeasance in office." Taking recently-acquired reading glasses from their case in his shirt pocket, he put them on and peered skeptically at the memo. "Stamped 'urgent' as usual. Why is it, Bergeron, that every

damned piece of paper that floats down from above is always stamped 'urgent'?"

"In my view, skipper, it's the only stamp they have if you don't count 'top secret'."

"I'd like to buy them a 'file and forget'. Take a load off your feet while I wade through this thing. It may offer me an urgent excuse to get the hell out of here until the air conditioning is back at work."

"As you say, sir."

Self-consciously resettling the glasses on his broad nose, McFate gave stern attention to the following:

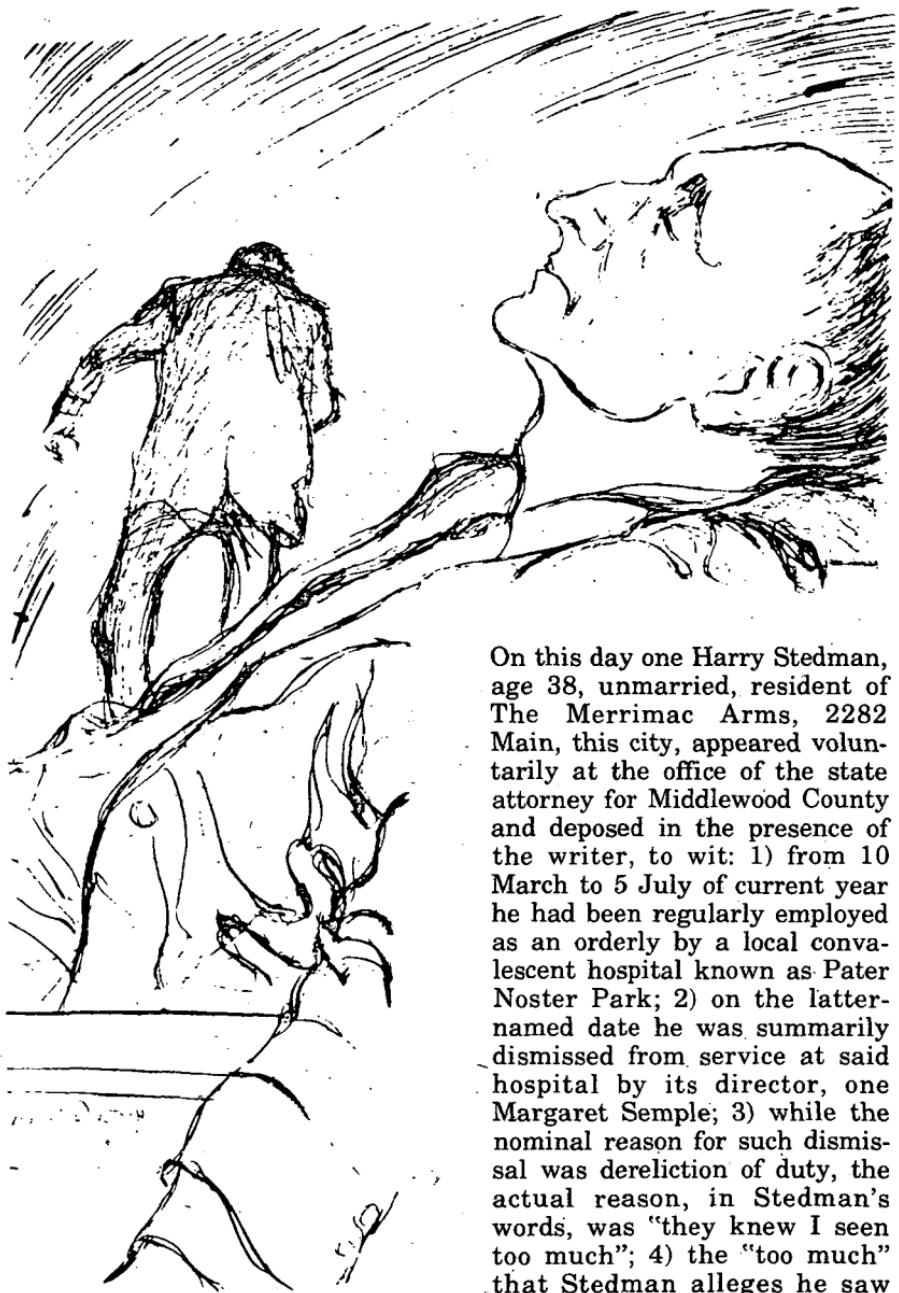
Date: 8 July

To: Police Chief Robert Reardon

From: Asst State Atty Abel Clover

Subject: Boris Malenov, Demise of

Complainant: Harry Stedman



On this day one Harry Stedman, age 38, unmarried, resident of The Merrimac Arms, 2282 Main, this city, appeared voluntarily at the office of the state attorney for Middlewood County and deposed in the presence of the writer, to wit: 1) from 10 March to 5 July of current year he had been regularly employed as an orderly by a local convalescent hospital known as Pater Noster Park; 2) on the latter-named date he was summarily dismissed from service at said hospital by its director, one Margaret Semple; 3) while the nominal reason for such dismissal was dereliction of duty, the actual reason, in Stedman's words, was "they knew I seen too much"; 4) the "too much" that Stedman alleges he saw

was the killing on the morning of 5 July of one patient Boris Malenov by another patient Gregory Brown; 5) although both these patients were elderly men confined to wheelchairs, Stedman attests to witnessing Brown beat Malenov to death with a crutch; 6) scene of the alleged homicide was the game room, where the two men had been engaged in a game of chess; and 7) the hospital owners covered up the true cause of Malenov's demise, according to Stedman, by attributing it to "natural causes" on a death certificate executed that same day by Dr. Emilio Samonte...

Turning to the second page, McFate said, "Have you read any of this, Bergeron?"

"A quick gander, skipper, as I walked it in here."

McFate began to scan the second page.

Informal and necessarily limited inquiry by this office developed sketchy background data re individuals mentioned in this memo that may or may not be relevant to Stedman's charges, id est: Harry Stedman unstable personality, frequent user of uppers and downers, arrested once locally for jaywalking . . .

"Good Christ!" McFate said aloud to himself and then resumed reading.

Emilio Samonte, M. D., wholly

owns Pater Noster Park Convalescent Hospital, married, two children, enjoys favorable reputation among colleagues.

Margaret Semple, hospital director, is R. N., a widow and Samonte's sister-in-law.

Boris Malenov, the deceased, 62, operated with wife Anya an antique shop called Ye Olde Gallery at 55 Sunrise Avenue where they also maintained an apartment.

Gregory Brown, alleged assailant, 63, retired, of 301 Hickory Drive, this city.

Nota bene: Copy of death certificate to this case has not yet been filed with city health department as far as this office can ascertain, which indicates some sort of irregularity here inasmuch as Stedman maintains (confirmed by switchboard operator at hospital) that Malenov's body was removed by undertaker a few hours after death. State law generally requires that anyone licensed to transport a body from one place to another must present a permit issued by the city or town in which the death occurred that certifies a proper certificate of death had been filed with such town or city. Therefore, it's the conclusion of this office that a preliminary investigation into Stedman's charges is warranted.

The bottom of the memo was signed with a thick black AB under which Chief Reardon had scribbled in red pencil: Capt McFate—Take this baby and

run with it, Tom. And good luck, R.R.

McFate removed his glasses and dropped the memo on his desk blotter. Then he produced a folded handkerchief and started to pat the beads of sweat that had formed in the wrinkles of brow and neck.

"I wonder, Bergeron, if this place—Pater Noster Park—is as cool as its name implies?" he asked, putting the handkerchief away.

"Could be," Bergeron said, taking the phone directory from the edge of McFate's desk. "Unless I'm wrong, it's in the southwestern part of the city, right near the Cudbury border. Stately grounds and all that." He stopped flipping through the directory pages and marked an entry with his forefinger. "Yeah, here it is. One-o-three Meadowbrook Road."

"Let's take a run over there."

"Both of us?"

"We'll let Sergeant Samuels hold the fort. And we'll be back in an hour anyway."

A COLUMN OF NORWAY spruce stood tall and green on either side of the macadam road that led up to the entrance of the convalescent hospital and on to the parking lot to the left. The smooth monotony of the wide green lawn was broken by several circular flower beds abloom

with reds and yellows and pinks. A few patients sat around in canopied chairs; a few others with the aid of canes or crutches were inching from somewhere to somewhere.

The building, two stories of gleaming white with glossy black trim, was U-shaped, the entrance centered in the base of the U.

Pater Noster's interior was so refreshingly cool that McFate was tempted to utter its name in prayer. Instead he accosted a stocky young nurse and asked where the director might be. She pointed to a white door on the far side of the lobby.

"Just knock and go right in," she said and then continued on her stocky way.

The detectives traversed russet carpet. McFate knocked, rather discreetly for him.

"Yes?" The voice was feminine but crisp.

Sitting behind a large bone-colored table that served as a desk, Mrs. Margaret Semple added another element of coolness to the air conditioning. Hovering gracefully at 40, she was almost beautiful in a bleak fashion. A snowy swath wavered through the center of her black hair. Her silver-rimmed glasses glittered icily. Her lipstick had a chilly sheen. Although her pale blue blouse was nearly diaphanous, its lacy

collar and cuffs made it seem chastely correct.

"Yes, gentlemen?" she said, arching her perfect symmetrical eyebrows.

McFate introduced himself and Bergeron, flashing his own tin in the process, and then characteristically got to the point.

"We're here," he said, "to ask a few questions about the death of one of your patients."

"A police matter? Well, that's a bit unusual in a place like this where, unfortunately, death is a normal occurrence. But be seated, gentlemen, and I'll do my best to answer your questions. Which patient is it?"

"Boris Malenov."

Mrs. Semple's face registered sufferance. "Oh, I see."

"You see what?" McFate said.

"I see that one of our former employees has reached you with his vindictive story."

"Not quite," McFate said. "But a man named Harry Stedman has reached the state attorney's office and he's spinning them a heavy yarn, ma'am."

"Pure fabrication, Captain. Stedman's brain, such as it is, has been so distorted by constant use of amphetamines and barbiturates that he hallucinates a good deal of the time. In fact, we dismissed him because we caught him redhanded

breaking into a locked medicine cabinet."

"When was that?"

"That was last Saturday," she replied.

"You should have preferred charges. What time last Saturday, ma'am?"

"Late in the afternoon. Before dinner. Why do you ask?"

"And when did Malenov die?"

"Just before lunch. One of the nurses discovered him alone in the game room. His wheelchair had been overturned. He was lying on the floor—dead, as it turned out." Mrs Semple's brown eyes narrowed knowingly. "Now I see what you're getting at, Captain."

"Do you?"

"The time lapse between Malenov's death and Stedman's dismissal."

"A lapse of five or six hours. During that time did Stedman happen to mention that he had seen Malenov clubbed to death with a crutch?"

Mrs. Semple's face expressed honest surprise. "Is that what the man has been telling the authorities?"

"That's what he's been telling them, all right. What I'd like to know is whether he was telling the same story here before you gave him the gate."

"He certainly never told it to me. And if he'd told anyone else on the staff it would have been

brought to my attention right away."

"Did he say anything about it when you were firing him?"

"He did not. While we were making out his check he kept muttering about unfair labor practices, but I'm afraid I listened with only half an ear. Obviously the man was full of pills."

"Who signed the death certificate?"

"Why, Doctor Samonte of course. He's the—"

"Did he sign it immediately?"

"Within an hour two, I think. That's the usual procedure here. We like to have the body taken—"

The door opened part way and a head of grizzled hair, horn-rimmed glasses and iron-gray mustache looked in. "Sorry, Maggie," the head said. "I'll be back later."

"No, Doctor, come right in," Mrs Semple said. "I think you should be present at this."

Opening the door wider, the head showed itself to be superimposed on a plump white-jacketed body. "Well, what's it all about?"

"These gentlemen are from the Police Department," Mrs. Semple said, and then introduced Dr Emilio Samonte to McFate and Bergeron.

"Glad you're here," McFate said. "We were going to call



you in sooner or later anyhow."

"Oh?"

"They're inquiring into the death of Boris Malenov," Mrs Semple said. "Stedman, that orderly we got rid of, has concocted some cock-and-bull story—"

"Oh, yes, Boris Malenov," Samonte said imperturbably. "He wasn't with us very long, I'm afraid."

"How long was that?" McFate asked.

"Just several days. Maggie—Missis Semple—can tell you exactly."

"Mister Malenov was admitted at two on the afternoon of July third."

"What was the matter with him?" Bergeron asked.

"Perhaps Doctor—"

"He was in extremely bad shape," Samonte said. "He was suffering generally from acute alcoholism and all its concomitants. Periodic delirium, malnutrition, severe neuritis, the entire Korsakow syndrome."

Frowning, McFate said, "When you signed the death certificate, Doctor, what did you say he died of?"

"I used a medical euphemism—natural causes," Samonte said.

"I understand a nurse found Malenov pitched on his head in the game room beside an overturned wheelchair. Is that con-

sidered a natural situation around here?"

"Hardly, Captain. But not unusual either, especially in the case of a terminal alcoholic. We concluded that a death spasm caused him to overturn the chair. As simple as that."

"Were there any simple little abrasions on his head?" McFate asked, heavily ironic.

"Well, yes, he'd sustained a rather ugly bruise in his fall."

"Like a fractured skull maybe?"

"I hardly think so. What are you getting at, Captain?"

Mrs. Semple answered. "Stedman claims he saw Malenov clubbed with a crutch."

"Fantastic!" Samonte said. "Why, the man is a pathological case."

"Possibly," McFate said. "But the fact remains that you attributed death to natural causes without questioning the bruise on Malenov's head."

"The bruise is noted in the death certificate," Samonte replied smugly.

"As a result of his fall, not as a cause of it."

"That is so."

A lull followed. After several seconds Bergeron said, "About that death certificate, Doctor. It was signed on the fifth of July, not long after Malenov's death. Is that correct?"

"Yes. That is correct."

"Today is the ninth and as yet it hasn't been filed at City Hall. We checked Vital Statistics just before coming over here."

"Yes, how do you account for that?" McFate added.

"Oversight." Samonte allowed his face to register faint regret. "Less than an hour ago I found the certificate under a pile of papers on my desk. I dispatched it promptly to City Hall by special messenger."

"Who removed the body?" McFate asked.

"Oliver Lockery. He operates the Lockery Funeral Home. His services were retained by Mrs. Malenov after we notified her of her husband's death."

"Obviously he didn't have the necessary permit to remove the body."

"Obviously. The fifth was a Saturday, Captain, and City Hall was closed."

"In that case, he's required to obtain a permit from the medical examiner's office."

"I confess we didn't go strictly by the book. As a matter of fact, some years ago I served briefly as an assistant medical examiner. Lockery knew me then, so I suppose he felt my okay was as good as a permit."

"That was Lockery's mistake."

"A trivial one, wouldn't you say?"

"Not if Malenov was murdered."

"Don't tell me you're lending credence to Stedman's wild story."

"I'll decide how wild the story is, Doctor, after I've talked with Gregory Brown."

After exchanging a puzzled glance with Samonte, Mrs. Semple said, "What's Gregory Brown got to do with this?"

"He's the gent, according to Stedman, who beat Malenov with a crutch."

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Semple said, her coolness suddenly evaporating.

"I'd like to talk with him now," McFate said.

"That's impossible," Mrs. Semple said.

"Why so? He's a patient here, isn't he?"

"Not any longer?"

"When did he check out?"

"Last Saturday."

"After Malenov's death?" McFate asked.

"Yes."

"How long after?"

"We don't know exactly. He was present for lunch but not around for dinner."

"You mean he just walked away some time in the afternoon?"

"That's right, Captain. He didn't even pay his bill."

"What was he being treated for?"

"Asthma. July was his bad month. He came here to prevent the usual attack—for the oxygen, you know."

"When did he check in?"

Mrs Semple again glanced at Samonte before answering. "We admitted him on the third of the month."

"The same day as Malenov?"

"Yes, they arrived within an hour of each other—Brown first and then Malenov."

"Well, we have his home address," McFate said and then, seeing the dejected expression on Mrs. Semple's face, he added, "Or do we?"

"I'm afraid we don't," the woman said. "The address he gave us is non-existent. In fact, there's no such street in the city as Hickory Drive."

McFate's eyes narrowed and his lips tightened. After a moment he said, "Stedman's story doesn't sound too wild any longer, does it?"

THE LOCKERY FUNERAL HOME was a modern one-story building of sandstone with tan awnings monogrammed *L* shading the deepset windows. Bergeron parked the unmarked cruiser between two portable signs that read *Reserved for Funeral Cars*. There was a concrete ramp instead of steps leading to the

liver-colored front door, also monogrammed.

A young man with longish yellow locks responded to the bell. Yes, Mr Lockery was in. If the gentlemen would step this way, he would notify him they were present.

The detectives found themselves in a waiting room exactly like those in the offices of dentists and doctors—chrome chairs with sponge-rubber cushions, a single ash tray, popular magazines two months old. The air conditioning here was set much lower than that at Pater Noster Park. In fact, the temperature was downright frigid.

"He's not going to let anything spoil around here," McFate said.

"Here's the thermostat," Bergeron said. "I'm going to push it up to fifty."

"At least," McFate said.

A moment later a tall thin man entered the room. His dark hair was sleekly parted in the middle. The face was long-jawed and waxy pale, with lips as purple as grapes, giving him momentarily the appearance of a clothing dummy. He offered McFate, whom he seemed to know by sight, a damp boneless hand.

"An unexpected visitation, Captain," he said.

"Meet Lieutenant Bergeron," McFate said.

"Delighted," Lockery said, offering the limp hand again.

"That delight is going to fade in a few minutes, Lockery," McFate said.

"Oh, I trust not, I trust not." Lockery walked to the thermostat and reset it downward. "Somebody is always fiddling with these things. I'm going to have to put up signs, I suppose."

"We're here about the body of Boris Malenov," McFate said.

"I see. Well, it's not here now, sir."

"We assumed as much. Where did you bury it?"

"I didn't bury it. In keeping with the instructions of the widow, I transported the body last Sunday—the day after I received it—to New Haven where it was cremated by the Eternal Rest Cemetery Association."

"You're in trouble, Lockery," McFate said.

"I can't imagine why."

"Let me spell it out. First, you've been carting a body around the state without legal permission. Second, this particular body—"

"But I'm an undertaker, Captain," Lockery broke in. "This is what I do for a living. I had the authorization of Doctor Samonte, a most reputable physician, and the further authorization of Mrs. Malenov, the beloved wife of—"

"Neither of them could legally authorize you to cremate a cat," McFate snapped. "Now listen good, Lockery. It's very possible that Malenov was murdered."

"Dreadful, dreadful!"

"If such is the case, you are in the position of having destroyed proof of the crime, the *corpus delicti*."

Lockery lowered himself into one of the chrome chairs, his pale face taking on the sheen of waxed fruit. "Good Lord," he said faintly. "I can't believe it! Murder, you say?"

"That's what it looks like. Now let me ask you a few questions. When you were preparing the body for its trip to New Haven, did you notice evidence that it had been beaten about the head?"

"There were several abrasions and contusions."

"What about a skull fracture?"

"I fear I didn't examine the body that closely, Captain. In the case of a regular funeral, with a wake and all, I work with a fine-tooth comb, making sure that the deceased is cosmetically presentable. But where cremation is the order, particularly immediate cremation, I bypass the niceties, as it were, and simply box the body with as little attention as possible. And that was the widow's

wish—to cut cost to the bone."

"Are you telling us this so-called beloved wife was shopping for a cut rate?"

"That's about the size of it, Captain. Of course she was terribly upset. She's Russian, you know, and the Russians take death very emotionally."

"Yeah, the Russians, the Swedes, the Greeks, the French and every other nationality inhabiting the goddamn globe. How did the Malenov women show her deep emotion—aside from cutting cost to the bone?"

"Well, when she came here Saturday night to work out details, she preferred not to view the body."

"Didn't you think that odd?"

"Not really. Many people can't bear to see their loved ones dead. I found the woman's aversion quite understandable."

"You're a very understanding gent, Lockery. Let's hope the licensing board is half as understanding when they learn about your irresponsible performance in the Malenov case."

Despite the room's frosty temperature beads of sweat were forming on Lockery's pallid brow as the detectives left.

The cruiser's interior was like a sauna bath.

"Nearly noon," McFate said, consulting his wristwatch. "Let's stop at the first quick-service joint we come to and

grab something to eat and a big iced tea."

"Right on," Bergeron said.

They ate standing outside the simmering cruiser and then drove back to Headquarters. The air conditioning still was not functioning. The maintenance men, Sergeant Samuels reported, had broken for lunch.

"And, Captain, there's an undertaker trying to reach you," he added. "Says it's urgent."

"Lockery?"

"Yeah, Oliver Lockery. The number's four-three-three-eight-nine-nine-nine."

"Thanks, Sergeant. I'm going out again in a few minutes. Who's available to go with me?"

"Powell's kind of free. Black has been peaceful as well as beautiful the last twenty-four hours."

"Have him stand by. Come on, Lieutenant. Let's see what's on Lockery's mind all of a sudden."

Back in his office McFate sat on the edge of the desk and gave the switchboard the undertaker's number.

Lockery answered immediately with a mellifluous "Lockery Funeral Home".

"This is McFate. I got your message."

"Oh, yes, Captain. After you gentlemen departed I got to thinking."

"Yeah?"

"About a little hobby of mine."

"That's nice."

"I started it five or six years back when the little lady gave me a Polaroid color camera for Christmas. What I do is I take a couple of snapshots, full face and profile, of every body we handle. My own personal rogue's gallery, as you might say." He chortled drily. "Just a hobby, Captain, but you never know when one of these pictures might come in handy. Like now, for instance."

"So you've got a couple of Malenov."

"I do. Very clear too. Do you think they might aid your investigation?"

"They won't hurt, Lockery. I'll have them picked up in fifteen minutes."

"Will this take me off the hook, just a mite?"

"You better talk to your licensing board about that."

"But you can put in a good word."

"I'm thinking about it." McFate hung up and turned to Bergeron. "The creep photographs all the stiffness. He's got mug shots, side and full, of Malenov. I'll pick them up on the way to Ye Olde Gallery."

"Ye Olde Gallery?" Bergeron looked perplexed for a moment. "Oh, yes, the widow."

"That's right. I'd like to know



how well she knows the allegedly asthmatic Gregory Brown."

"Why, sure. That's got to be the connection."

"Meanwhile, I want you to start checking with our pal over at the insurance clearing house. If there's a heavy policy outstanding on Malenov, we've got the makings of a motive. I'll phone in in an hour or so."

DETECTIVE POWELL, his black face gleamingly impassive, came briskly down the ramp at Lockery's, slid into the driver's seat and handed McFate a small manilla envelope.

"Keeps it cold in there, doesn't he?" McFate said.

"Man, it's the North Pole."

"I'd like to bottle some of it and sprinkle it around the office." McFate extracted two prints from the envelope. "Our next stop is Sunrise Avenue. Fifty-five. A place called Ye Olde Gallery."

"Yes, sir."

As they pulled away from the curb McFate began to study the color snapshots of the closed-eyed corpse. A livid bruise on the right temple was plainly apparent in the frontal view. In the profile, which was taken from the right, a patch of dried blood discolored the sparse gray hair behind the right ear. Either of these injuries, McFate's experience told him, could be an indication of fatal skull damage. On the other hand, they could be merely superficial contusions sustained in a fall from a wheelchair, as Dr Samonte had preferred to deduce. But now nobody would ever be sure.

One certitude was etched into the jaundiced hollows of the man's sunken face—death from booze, malnutrition and refined liver had been lurking just around the corner. If ever there was a likely looking candidate for a coffin, McFate concluded, this was the guy.

On the lower part of Sunrise Avenue, where most of the houses are big and old, poplars still flourish in the grassy

verge between street and sidewalk. Number 55, a rambling structure of battleship gray, was distinguished from its neighbors by a long glassed-in sun porch that featured visible displays of glassware, porcelain figurines, old clocks, brass candlesticks and terra-cotta statuettes.

"I guess this is it," Powell said.

"So it is," McFate said. "Park down under that next tree where it's good and shady. You see, I want you to stay out of sight. The lady I'm going to interview, you may have to tail her a little later."

Powell nodded and parked in the shade of the designated tree.

McFate walked back to the Malenov house. In the yard, topped by a japanned weather-vane shaped like a rooster, stood a wooden sign:

YE OLDE GALLERY
ANTIQUE SUNDRIES
NOTARIZED APPRAISALS

Under the doorbell was tacked a handwritten card—*Closed because of death in family.*

McFate pushed the bell button long and hard and heard it faintly from deep inside the house. After a few minutes, a woman—presumably Anya

Malenov—put in an annoyed appearance behind the glass door and shook her head.

McFate let her see his tin.

Her eyes grew angrier, if anything, but she unlocked the glass door and opened it. "What you here for? I'm close up for business. My husband, he's dead. I'm in mourning."

"That's what I'm here for," McFate said. "About your husband's death."

"The police? How does this sad matter concern the police?"

"May I come inside and explain, ma'am?"

"Could I hold you out." Shrugging, she stepped aside and then closed the door behind him.

She led him through the maze of counters on the sun porch and on into a double parlor which was heavily furnished with a great variety of very old stuff. McFate's unpractised eye noted a tripod table with a pie-crust top, a huge breakfront bookcase barren of so much as a single volume, a spraddle-legged sideboard similar to one that had stood in his father's house, several gilt-framed mirrors with warped reflections—all, to his way of thinking, absurd and impractical.

As they proceeded through a large dining room bristling with fancy jugs, vases and pots a telephone began to ring in

another part of the house. Mrs Malenov increased her pace. They entered a sitting room off the kitchen. The ringing phone sat on a black drum-top table.

"Good afternoon," the woman said into the mouthpiece.

McFate sank into one of two easy chairs and watched and listened without appearing to do so.

Mrs Malenov's silky white hair—it would have been called platinum blonde if it hadn't been natural—contributed to a first impression that she was older than her actual age. Studying her covertly, McFate adjusted her from 60 down to a possible 50, and a rather shapely 50 at that. This made her a good 10 years younger than the late Boris.

"Boris made provision," she was saying to the phone. "The money you will get, don't worry." She listened with a frown. "In two days. Three maybe. Patience." Again she listened without liking it. "Okay, okay. Listen. Today is what? Wednesday. Okay, so you come Friday morning sharp here at ten o'clock and I give you a check in full. Take it or leave it. Goodbye." She hung up angrily. "No mercy, some people."

"Money's a merciless partner," McFate said. "How's business?"

"Not so good now. Inflation. People buy food, not antiques."

"You have quite an inventory."

"Much is on consignment."

"But Boris made provision."

"Is this police work? Checking a widow's purse?"

"It is when a widow converts her husband from a corpse to ashes in less than twenty-four hours."

A flush of fear rouged her cheeks. "What you mean by that? My husband, he always expressed a wish to be cremated. I got it in writing."

"How well do you know Oliver Lockery?"

"The undertaker?"

"That's the gent."

"I know him not at all. I get his name from the Yellow Pages as soon as the hospital tells me Boris is dead. Why you ask these questions?"

"Are you acquainted with a man named Gregory Brown?"

Her mouth opened in wordless surprise but she got herself quickly under control. "I never heard of him," she replied finally.

"Well, you may be hearing quite a lot about him from now on."

"Why is that?"

"There's a good chance he hurried your husband on the way to the crematorium."

"I do not believe this. The

woman at the hospital—the director—she tell me that Boris died of natural causes. It was to be expected, she said. He was far gone when I take him there. The drink, you know."

"I understand he was a bad boy with a bottle."

"A curse it was."

"He couldn't have been much help with the business."

"But he was. His eye for antiques, very good."

"Were you married long?"

"Twenty years. Time to get used to each other."

"You'll miss him, I imagine."

"Of course," she said without passion.

Then the phone rang again. She reached for it with obvious relief. Presumably it was another creditor calling. Seeing the frown wrinkle her forehead, McFate got to his feet, inclined his head in silent farewell and departed.

Her mourning, he reflected, didn't go deep, that was for sure.

Slouched in the driver's seat, Powell was listening indifferently to the crackling of the police calls and lulls.

Coming alongside, McFate said, "Send out a signal to the cruiser nearest this location. I need a ride somewhere else and I want you to stay here. I'll bet a day's pay the lady I just talked to will leave that house

in an hour. Follow wherever she goes, Powell, and report back to my office as soon as she settles."

Three minutes later a marked police car came burning rubber around the corner of Sunrise and Poplar and pulled up behind the unmarked vehicle, nearly kissing its bumper. Sighing wearily, McFate observed that the cowboy behind the wheel was a rookie. He wore the name *Holbeck* on the tab above the pocket of his short-sleeved dark-blue uniform shirt.

"We're going to take a drive over to Main Street," McFate said, climbing aboard. "The twenty-two hundred block. I don't expect you to break any speed records."

"As you say, sir."

En route, McFate called the radio dispatcher at headquarters and asked him to fetch Lieutenant Bergeron. In a couple of minutes Bergeron's voice came in over the receiver.

"Captain McFate?"

"I'm listening, Lieutenant."

"You were dead right about insurance. Certified life wrote a policy for a hundred K less than four months ago on the mortal prospects of one Boris Malenov."

"With Anya Malenov as beneficiary?"

"Sole beneficiary."

"I don't suppose they've paid off yet."

"Get this, skipper. Normally they might have. The watchword at Certified is settlement of most death claims within forty-eight hours. And they might have lived up to it in spite of the fact that Malenov died on the first part of a weekend. What actually delayed the schedule was Doctor Samonte's failure to file the death certificate until today."

"Have they got the paper now?"

"A few hours ago. They were on the verge of making a satisfied customer out of the widow when they got wind of our investigation. Now all hell's broke loose."

"For instance."

"They've just learned from Samonte that 'natural causes' in Malenov's case should really read 'toxic alcoholism' and this is causing them to wonder why he passed a physical examination four months ago. They're now trying to question the doctor who apparently gave Malenov a clean bill of health."

"Is he unavailable?"

"Vacationing in Maine. They expect to reach him by phone within the hour."

"Well, one thing's sure, Bergeron. The widow is hurting for money. While I was interviewing her I got the feeling Ye

Olde Gallery is close to bankruptcy. Isn't your wife a sucker for antiques?"

"I never put it that way to her face."

"Nor would I," McFate said. "But why don't you phone her favorite dealers and sound them out on the Malenovs."

"Yes, sir."

"How's the air conditioning?"

"Still not functioning."

"Oh, those incompetent sons. I'll be back in touch with you in an hour. Right now I'm on my way to the Merrimac Arms to see Harry Stedman.

THE MERRIMAC ARMS always reminded McFate of a building that had been constructed by a penny-pinching eccentric in consultation with a disturbed architect. Now, 40 or so years later, it frankly exhibited all the flaws of its unstable origins—the cupolas listed, cracks in fluted columns revealed the inner hollowness, stairs sagged, fire escapes rusted, window frames swelled, carpeting was a threadbare patchwork, doors shrank from jambs, and the whole place reeked, literally, of decrepitude.

Leaving Holbeck in the cruiser with instructions to wait, McFate entered the Merrimac lobby and learned from a small hatchet-faced clerk that Stedman's room was 301. The

elevator was out of order, so McFate took to the creaky stairs.

Harr Stedman was at home. McFate could hear movement behind the warped green door. He knocked sharply. That caused the door to swing partly open. He saw a thin bony man standing between a slept-in bed and an old Boston rocker, hairless head cocked fearfully.

"Who's that?" the bony man asked.

"I'm the cops," McFate said, opening the door wider. "Are you Harry Stedman?"

"You hit it right. That's me. Harry Stedman. Come in, man. Cops always welcome. I like cops. They got a bad name in some quarters. But not in mine. Sit in the rocker, man. I'll use the bed."

McFate entered and looked around. Against one dirty wall stood a bureau with every drawer knob missing and its mirror crazed. A discolored porcelain sink in a corner was receiving from a faucet a mighty drop of water at five-second intervals. The linoleum on the floor was so worn that it had practically mouldered into the underlying wood.

No wonder the poor scarecrow popped pills, McFate thought.

Already sitting on the lumpy bed, bony hands on spiky

knees, Stedman was grinning up at McFate like a dog expecting a bone.

"Harry, I want to discuss the subject you brought up yesterday with Abel Glover," McFate said.

"Why, sure, man. Why not? Abel Glover. Who's Abel Glover, man?"

"An assistant state attorney. You spilled all over his office yesterday. Or don't you remember?"

Stedman blinked his eyes rapidly. "Oh, yeah, sure enough. I forgot the cat's name offhand like. It happens. Little things slip my mind, roll outa sight. Seems lately I—"

"Stop leaking at the mouth, Harry. Just answer my questions."

"You said it, sir. Whatever you say."

"You told Glover you saw one patient assault another last Saturday morning while you were still on the payroll of the Pater Noster Park Convalescent Hospital. Is that true, Stedman?"

"That's what I told the man."

"I know it's what you told him, Harry. What I want to know is how much of what you said you saw is the truth."

"All of it, man, and more. Those two old studs, they were like Mutt and Jeff, all the time bickering."

"You're referring now to Malenov and Brown?"

"Who else?"

"They were only resident in the hospital two days. What you're saying implies they formed an acquaintance pretty fast."

"That's routine in these geriatric roosts, man. Most everyone takes a fast interest in everyone else. Time is short. They don't waste it on slow forms of etiquette. They go to the point, know what I mean? How fast your fingernails growing, how many teeth you got left? Basic rap, man, and no crap. But the duffers you're asking about, man—Brown and Malenov—they knew each other before they come in. Yes, sir, make book on that."

"What makes you think that, Harry?"

"Why, a few hours after they were admitted, Brown wheels himself into Malenov's room while the section nurse is on a coffee break and starts feeding him booze out of a flask he carries in his bathrobe pocket. Malenov was a juicehead, know what I mean, and on his last legs, man. Wasn't supposed to be drinking anything stronger than maybe diluted goat milk. So this scene was not strictly routine, man—this was old pals together."

"How did you happen to see this?"

"Me, I were crêpe soles on duty, man. I float around. Actually I was reconnoitering the pill depository in a closet across from Malenov's room. Let's be honest, man. I like my Sparkle Plenties."

"So I hear. Now let's get to Saturday morning, Harry. As I understand it, you were crêpe-soling in the vicinity of the game room when you saw something happen. What exactly did you see?"

"Well, man, I was polishing the floor just outside in the hall. Inside, the boob tube is tuned to the cartoon circuit. They dote on cartoons, the old folks. I polish my way up to the door and look in. Nobody's sitting in the sofas in front of the set, but I hear voices like arguing somewhere in the room and I look farther in and I see Malenov and Brown sitting at the chess table.

"But they ain't playing chess, man. They got their wheelchairs parked side by side and Brown is leaning over to Malenov and trying to make him do something he don't want to do. He's trying to make him take a swig out of that flask I mentioned."

"And Malenov won't take it?" McFate raised skeptical black brows.

"Comprenez, man. The juicehead don't want the juice just then. And for good reason, man. Old Doc Samonte has probably slipped him the routine tonic for the shakers—a dram of anti-hooch medicine which makes your gut turn inside out if you use booze as a chaser. I've seen the reaction, man, and it's the dry heaves in doubles. So that's what Malenov is fighting against."

"But Brown persists?"

"Like he won't take no for an answer, man. But skinny old Malenov still got some half-dead strength left and he keeps warding off the flask and trying to wheel himself the hell out of range, all the time begging Brown in a sort of whimper not to force the stuff down his throat. He keeps saying, 'Please don't force. I'm going to be sick,' and finally he starts to cry like a baby, man.

"Of course this don't sit well with rough old Brown, know what I mean, because suddenly he rears up out of his chair and grabs a crutch that's leaning against the table, and not one of these light aluminum crutches either but a heavy wooden job, and swings the upper end of it at Malenov's head. Well, let me tell you, man, that was no love tap.

"It pivots Malenov and his wheelchair almost a full circle

and then Brown swings again and that does it. The blow knocks Malenov and the wheelchair over onto the floor, and I take myself and the polishing equipment around the corner to another hall, man, and that's it."

An idea jelled in McFate's mind. "From what you saw, Harry, would you consider Brown in need of hospital treatment?"

"No way, man! He was healthier than me."

"That's not saying much, Harry."

Stedman grinned in clownish appreciation. "Almost as healthy as you, man. How's that?"

McFate smiled. "All right, Harry. Just one more question. As soon as you heard that Malenov was dead, why didn't you immediately report the incident in the game room to the proper hospital authorities?"

"You must be putting me on, man. By the time I heard, they'd got everything like tidied up, death certificate and all. Besides, why rock the boat? That's where the goodies were."

With a final look around Stedman's room McFate had no trouble understanding his simple motivation.

HOLBECK WAS BATHED in sweat and bursting with information

when McFate returned to the cruiser.

"Lieutenant Bergeron's been on the radio twice in the last ten minutes," the rookie said. "He wants you to call in at once. Top priority, he says."

"Thanks," McFate said. "Now point us in the direction of headquarters."

As they started back along the main drag McFate called in. Bergeron must have been standing by in the dispatch room because he came on right away.

"Interesting developments, skipper," he said.

"I'm listening."

"First, the latest dope from Certified Life. That doctor who gave Malenov the physical for the policy—they finally got him on the horn. He states emphatically that the man he examined exhibited not a single symptom of alcoholism. To the contrary, he was in robust health for his age. The doctor will take his Hippocratic oath on it. So it looks like Malenov may have had a stand-in at the doctor's office. What do you think, skipper?"

"I'm still listening."

"Well, my wife's antique dealers were next. The consensus is that the Malenovs were fairly successful operators up until a year ago and that they owed this success largely to a

man they employed name Selwyn Banks. This guy Banks is considered by the trade to be kind of a genius so far as detecting something of great value disguised by years of grime. They say he could walk into an old barn and discover a makeshift oat feeder was actually a Chippendale or Sheraton chair.

"But not only did Banks have an unerring eye for the genuine, he also liked his bourbon to be a hundred proof and plentiful. About a year ago he was so besotted most of the time that the Malenovs finally dispensed with his services, except for consulting him occasionally when he was sober. At any rate, on their own recognition, so to speak, the Malenovs began to lose ground. They bought unwisely and didn't sell too well. They took things on consignment and then failed to pay the consignor after the sale. To hear the trade tell it, the wolf is right outside the Malenov's door."

"That figures," McFate said. "Has Powell called in?"

"Yes, just a few minutes ago. He says the Malenov woman, Anya, drove away from the Sunrise Avenue place in a station wagon about fifteen minutes after you left. She continued west, with Powell tailing, until Sunrise runs into the

West Meadows Drive and she continued on West Meadows until she reached Cavendish—"

"Forget the detailed itinerary, Bergeron. Where is the lady right now?"

"She's in a small cabin off Cudbury Turnpike in the Snake Hill area. An isolated place, according to Powell, that is reached by an unpaved road running a quarter of a mile into the woods. He's already reconnoitered on foot and says he observed a man's figure pass one of the cabin windows several times. Gregory Brown, wouldn't you say, skipper?"

"What I want you to do, Bergeron, is send a backup for Powell. Instruct Powell to arrest the occupants of that cabin as soon as his backup arrives. The charge—suspicion of murder."

"So Stedman's story holds up after all." Bergeron sounded officially vindicated. "Gregory Brown did slug Boris Malenov with a crutch."

"I'm afraid not," McFate said. "I think we'll soon find out it was Malenov who did the slugging."

"You mean Malenov slugged Gregory Brown? I don't get it, sir."

"I'm beginning to realize that the man Malenov slugged was probably Selwyn Banks."

"Selwyn Banks?" Bergeron

now sounded utterly baffled. "How did he get into it?"

"He's been in it all the time, the proverbial fall guy. We just didn't know he existed until your wife's friends mentioned his name."

"But what happened to Gregory Brown all of a sudden?"

"That was just a name Malenov used in getting admitted to Pater Noster Park, and he was in the hospital for one reason only—to make sure Banks died as fast as possible of what had already brought him close to death. When you hear Stedman's whole story, you'll know what I mean."

"I can hardly wait."

"One more thing."

"Yes?"

"How's the air conditioning?"

"They got it going."

"I'm coming in."

the state attorney's office to charge the Malenovs with homicide and conspiracy to defraud, Bergeron asked McFate, "When did you first realize the victim was not Malenov, Captain?"

"While chatting with Stedman in his charming digs. The way Harry told it, the so-called Malenov kept saying, 'Please don't force,' whenever the so-called Brown tried to make him drink from the flask. 'Please don't force.' The phrase ran false to me. Finally I reasoned that the fault might be in the translation. After all, a renowned pill freak was quoting a renowned juicehead. Anyway, it occurred to me that what actually had been said was something else."

"And what do you think was actually said, sir?"

"Please don't, Boris."

Bergeron's face was blank for a moment and then . . .

NEXT MORNING, while they were preparing the facts required by

NEXT MONTH:

COUNTERPOINT

by WYC TOOLE

John's uncle was a very rich man and his nephew was deeply in debt. It looked like a perfect set-up for an "accidental" death. The question was—whose?

**DO NOT FOLD,
SPINDLE OR
MUTILATE**



Koerner

"DIFFERENT" A STORY

Sherlock Holmes once cited the difference between the grotesque and the horrible as being a mere hair's breadth. Similarly, the difference between some mystery stories and science fiction can be laid on the sharp edge of a knife. After all, much of criminal behavior is fantastic, while much of science fiction deals with mystery, the greatest mystery of all, that of the universe. Here, in a fine first tale by a brand new author, we have such a story, one that not only straddles but belongs to both fields. The murders it deals with are very real and very bloody, to say nothing of baffling to police and reader alike. But the solution, when it is attained is pure science fiction—or is it? Nothing like it can or ever will happen in real life—or has it happened, is it happening right now? You'll have to read this thoroughly "different" story for yourself if you ever hope to find out.

by MARCIA K. BROWN

JOE DRISCOLL was found by his neighbors impaled on his old fashioned iron spiked fence, after falling from his extension ladder while washing the leaded windows of his Victorian house. The police were called as a matter of routine.

There was no doubt in anybody's mind but that Joe was thoroughly dead the moment the ornate spike pierced his back. The two ambulance attendants who arrived almost simultaneously with the police didn't know exactly how to go

about removing Joe's body without causing further disfigurement, which might upset the Driscoll family and friends.

They discussed the problem with Police Sergeant Malcolm Smith, who had first answered the frantic call of Joe Driscoll's next door neighbor. The neighbor had glanced out his own window to see Joe stretching to reach the top row of tiny diamond-shaped panes in a second floor window, partly because Joe hated washing windows and partly because he

hated equally climbing up and down his ladder, folding it shut and moving it on to a new position. The next time the neighbor looked out, Joe's body adorned the old-fashioned wrought-iron fence.

When Sergeant Smith's call for a backup team came into the station, Bill Kershaw, police reporter for the Springhill *Herald*, was catching up with the daily police blotter and went along in the patrol car for the ride, expecting nothing more exciting than a routine accident story.

Neither police nor ambulance attendants were really eager to remove Joe Driscoll from his impalement, for it would be a very messy business. Sergeant Smith had already used up his uniform-cleaning allotment for the week. The ambulance attendants didn't feel they could lift Joe off the fence alone, as it was extremely high and Joe was firmly stuck, having fallen about fifteen feet after overreaching himself.

Bill Kershaw was a reporter who liked to be in the center of action, if he wasn't personally in too much danger. Seeing his chance to write his story from a first person viewpoint, he volunteered to help remove Joe. As he climbed a stepladder provided by the neighbor who had called the police, he was

thinking that he would probably have to bill his newspaper for a new suit.

With the ambulance men on one side of the fence and Joe on the other, all on borrowed ladders, the three of them eased Joe's body up as straight as they could. As it cleared the top of the spike, blood spurted from the wound.

When the body was decently covered and removed by ambulance to the morgue, Kershaw dutifully interviewed all concerned, from the neighbor who had reported the freak accident to Sergeant Smith. By five o'clock that sunny April afternoon, when Mrs. Joe Driscoll drove up, unaware that she had been widowed while out shopping, all evidence of the untimely death had been removed, except for stains on the fence and the tulips which had been blooming gaily along its base and now were flattened by the many feet that had trod on them unheedingly. A small knot of people still huddled together at the corner, rehashing the afternoon's tragedy in hushed tones.

By this time, Kershaw had most of the facts he needed for his story. The neighbors had told him that the Driscolls were a quiet couple with no children, who had made their Victorian Gothic home their hobby. They

had bought it as a derelict house neighborhood children believed to be haunted, had restored it and refurbished it inside and out with genuine Victorian pieces, right down to the tall iron fence they had found at an auction and used as the finishing touch to the exterior of the now-elegant old place.

Joe Driscoll had been a competent tax consultant. He was known as a good neighbor, a homebody. Now that the old house was freshly painted and restored, he and his wife had been planning a party, an open house for their friends and neighbors to view the restoration. This was why Joe had been spending an April Saturday afternoon washing the windows. He was meticulous about clean windows, at the same time thoroughly disliking the chore itself.

Never once was his death questioned as anything but a freak accident. The tragedy faded somewhat in Bill Kershaw's mind after he filed his story, as fresher events took precedence. He remembered the tragedy mainly as a source for one of the better stories he had written. It had merited front page space for a day, along with a feature story about his part in helping remove the body. He had noted cause of death was reported by the

coroner as accidental and promptly dismissed the information from his conscious mind, going on to new police business for his newspaper.

Afterward, he was to remember everything about Driscoll's death in detail.

LESS THAN A MONTH later, Kershaw was called by his friend Sergeant Smith to ride with him to cover another death, in the same neighborhood as Driscoll's. In Springhill, a town of forty thousand people, it was strange that two bizarre deaths should occur in such a short time and only a few blocks apart. Again, it seemed that Sergeant Smith would need assistance at the scene of a death.

Old Harry Benson had been sitting on his front porch, rocking, when he suddenly collapsed. "Old" Harry was only sixty but because his hair had turned white at an early age and because there was a "Young" Harry, he had carried the nickname for a score or more years.

Mrs. Benson had rushed to his side when she heard him fall but she knew immediately when she saw him that Old Harry must have died almost before hitting the porch floor.

The coroner was called by Sergeant Smith primarily because the Bensons had no fam-

ily doctor to sign the death certificate. He told Sergeant Smith and Bill Kershaw that cause of death was undoubtedly a "stroke" but that he recommended an autopsy to be sure because of the strange position of the body. Old Harry had folded completely in half when he fell off his porch rocker and, even with Sergeant Smith's and Kershaw's help, the ambulance attendants could not straighten out the body in order to put it on a stretcher.

The coroner declared it wasn't rigor mortis as he knew it and there was no recognizable reason why Harry Benson could not be unfolded. In the end, Smith and Kershaw had helped to carry the body of Old Harry to the ambulance and had had to push it across the floor of the vehicle.

The next day, when Kershaw checked at the morgue, he learned that the coroner had performed his examination as best he could on a bent-double corpse that could not be straightened.

Kershaw filed a straight story for his newspaper, which stated that the county coroner had tentatively determined cause of death to be cerebral vascular accident—a stroke. He found no reason to delay the funeral or burial.

It was too delicate a subject

to mention in the newspaper, but poor old Mrs. Benson had hysterics when told by the mortician that her husband would not fit into a regular coffin but would have to be placed in a square box because of the unusual shape of "the remains". Out of consideration for the poor weeping widow and her son and daughter-in-law, it was decided to have simple graveside services, with the coffin covered by a mantle. It was, of course, a closed coffin.

While preparing his news story, Bill Kershaw returned to talk to Mrs. Benson, hoping to find a feature angle in the bizarre manner in which Old Harry had left life. In his friendliest manner, he tried to draw out Mrs. Benson in conversation. She was flattered by his attention.

"Poor Old Harry was sitting in the parlor one minute, making out checks for the bills. The next minute, he'd gone out on the front porch to rest and then—just gone! Taken by the Lord in a minute!" The widow broke into sobs.

Kershaw glanced over the untidy desk in the Benson parlor. Statements, envelopes, stamps, checks stapled to bills from a department store, a dentist, cleaners, service station. He noticed these papers were slightly scattered, as if someone

had pushed them aside angrily.

"Mrs. Benson, was your husband angry about something before he went out on the porch?" asked Kershaw, wondering if something had upset the old man, raising his blood pressure and leading to his strange, sudden death.

"Well," she dabbed at her tears and looked at the desk. "We *did* have this one bill that kept coming wrong. You know, one of those cards with holes punched in it that you're supposed to send back. It was our credit card bill for the gas for the car. They had overcharged Harry two ninety-eight now for three months and he kept writing them back that he didn't owe that. He was getting awfully fed up."

"Do you suppose he could have been angry enough about a bill to bring on a stroke?" asked Kershaw.

"Oh, I don't know, young man," she sounded doubtful. "Harry didn't get mad too often or too easy. But he was pretty peeved about this bill that kept coming wrong. He wrote to that company twice about it. Last month he folded that little card up real small and wrote on it something about us not owing that money and he wanted somebody to stop the machine sending out these cards wrong. Then this month they sent

another bill and a nasty letter about the two ninety-eight. It sure peeved him."

"Did he ever get a letter actually signed by someone?" asked Kershaw. "I get those bills myself sometimes with mistakes, especially after the oil company went onto computer billing."

"I haven't seen one. Just those bills that come right from the computer, Harry said. The letter he got was printed."

Mrs. Benson walked Kershaw to the front door. "I sure do appreciate your trying to help, Mr. Kershaw. It's an awful puzzle trying to figure out why my Harry died so strange."

THE MORNING AFTER Kershaw talked to Mrs. Benson, he had no sooner reached his desk than his city editor was yelling at him to get right out to the Marshfield subdivision, because a woman had been brutally murdered in one of the new houses. He was to get there as fast as he could, even while the police were on their way.

He arrived as the chief, Sergeant Smith, a detective and two uniformed officers piled out of their cars in front of the new little house. It was a raw-looking subdivision of mostly unfinished houses, with no trees and few lawns put in. Bulldozers had stripped the

topsoil, which would now be sold back to the owners of the new homes. A truckload of sod was parked in the driveway and the driver was sitting on the ground, leaning weakly against one of the big wheels after being thoroughly sick to his stomach.

"Who found the body?" Kershaw asked Sergeant Smith, who was waiting on the front steps while the chief and detective went inside to begin their investigation. The uniformed officers were deployed at front and back doors to keep out the curious, of whom there were few in this sparsely occupied area.

"The sod man, over there by his truck," said Smith grimly. An ambulance arrived, followed by still another squad car.

Police Chief Hallstrom and the detective came right back out of the house, both green of face. The detective also was violently sick behind the truck full of sod.

The chief wiped his perspiring face with a large handkerchief and shook his head at Smith. "Worst I've seen. Mutilated! Whoever did this has to be more animal than man."

"May I go in, Chief?" asked Kershaw.

"If you're prepared to be sick. This is the ugliest murder this town has seen," said Chief

Hallstrom. "I hate to go back, but we've got work to do. Sergeant, don't let anyone touch anything or walk too close to the house. I need fingerprint men and I want every inch of ground around the house gone over with a fine tooth comb. There may be footprints where the ground is soft. Anything—look for anything at all." Then he led Kershaw into the neat little house that smelled of new wood and plaster.

Kershaw was prepared for murder when he walked into the bedroom. And he was prepared for violence. But nothing could have prepared him for what remained of Cecily Durham. Her skin was torn to shreds in places and her face was unrecognizable. One eye was missing and her nose ripped by a deep gash along one side.

The room *should* have been a mess after such a struggle with death. The detective first surmised that Cecily might have been killed elsewhere and brought into the bedroom. This theory was soon punctured by the blood spattered on the wall behind the bed and soaking the bed itself on which the body sprawled grotesquely. The struggle had evidently taken place on the bed. A lamp was knocked off the bedside table.

Cecily Durham had been

twenty-five years old and engaged to be married, Kershaw learned. She had gone ahead and moved into the home she and her bridegroom were to have shared, in order to furnish and decorate it before the wedding.

She had no known enemies. Her fiancé had been in Chicago at a sales convention, in the constant company of other salesmen. There was no way he could have flown from Chicago to Springhill, committed the crime and returned, according to his hotel roommates at the convention. He and Cecily had dated for three years and he knew of no former boyfriends who might have carried a grudge.

Headlines in Kershaw's newspaper carried the banner MANIAC MURDERS LOCAL WOMAN.

An all-points bulletin was issued by the police for all known sex offenders. Mental hospitals and prisons were checked for escapees, or men recently released who might be capable of such a crime.

When the coroner had finished his autopsy the day after Cecily's body was found, he drove immediately to the office of Chief of Police Hallstrom. Closeted with him, he reported his findings. The coroner reported that Cecily



had died of blood inhalation, following the murderous attack upon her person. When Kershaw heard the findings a little later, he at first wondered if Cecily had been attacked by a wild animal. However, the coroner went on to say that the scrapings from under her fingernails contained blood and hair and bits of skin torn in her furious battle with death's messenger.

The coroner appeared shocked, as if he could scarcely believe his own tests, for he had to reveal that the blood and skin and hair found under the nails were from *Cecily herself!* Something

had caused her to tear herself apart!

"My God, was she on *drugs*?" asked Chief Hallstrom. "I've heard of LSD freaks doing this sort of thing to themselves."

"That's what I suspected at first," replied the coroner. "My lab tests show no sign of drugs, not even an aspirin. She'd had a hamburger and milk shake for dinner. This happened sometime in the middle of the night."

Kershaw asked, "Where would a girl like that, about a hundred-twenty pounds, get the strength to do that to herself in the first place? It doesn't make sense."

"Nothing about this case makes sense," said Sergeant Smith. "Only thing like this I ever heard of was a voodoo witch doctor down in Haiti who claimed he could control minds and force people to commit suicide a hundred miles from him."

"Next thing you'll be saying it was a UFO!" scoffed Kershaw.

The investigation continued. Townspeople kept a careful watch on their young people, convinced that a madman had done Cecily in. The police could not find a clue as to who or what had entered the house at Marshfield subdivision. It had been locked from inside. The

windows were fixed in place, because of total climate control of central heat and air. No fingerprints were ever found except those of construction workers, Cecily and her fiancé. Further lab tests proved utterly useless.

A week after the killing, Kershaw asked permission for the third time to go over the house again himself. His position as police reporter was unique—he had the eyes and ears of the police, also of the townspeople, and he had sometimes been known to find clues in cases where no one else could. He loved a puzzle and was never content until one was solved. Unsolved crimes haunted him.

He let himself into the house one more time, noting the newly planted *For Sale* sign on the new sod at the front of the lot. Inside, he went from room to room again.

The bedroom was still fully furnished, though now the mattress had been removed. The heartbroken would-be bridegroom had ordered the house sold as it was. The living room was empty. The den adjoining the kitchen across the back of the house contained a colonial divan and a maple drop-leaf desk with matching maple chair. It was obviously the room Cecily had most used dur-

ing her short stay in her new home.

Kershaw opened the desk and looked through the contents, although he and the police had done this several times before. Bills were in a neat pile, a checkbook laid across the pile at right angles to it. A stationery pad lay beside it, an unsigned letter written on the top page.

This time the words on the pad stirred something in Kershaw's memory. It said in a neat and precise feminine backhand:

Dear Sirs:

This is to inform you for the fourth time that there is an error on my bill. I did not purchase tires for my car, yet \$165 keeps appearing on my gas bill month after month. The Eureka Service Station has not sold me any tires! I am *again* tearing up your computer card and returning the pieces.

Please get somebody—a real person in your billing department—to check into this. Your computer is wrong!"

A stamped, addressed envelope lay under the pad. It bore the name and address of Western Oil Company. Inside the envelope were the shredded remains of the computer card which had obviously accompanied the statement. One piece of the card was slightly

higher than the others in the little pile in the envelope. Kershaw pulled it out and read the small letters: *Do not fold, spindle or mutilate.*

Suddenly, Kershaw remembered the desk at Old Harry Benson's house, similarly covered with bills and checks. A nebulous connection between the two deaths began to float just out of reach of firm thought. He tried to concentrate, to think it through.

He closed Cecily Durham's desk and left the house, hurrying to his car. He muttered to himself, "I wonder if Joe Driscoll also had a credit card with Western Oil. They say things happen in threes."

He tried to recall everything in his notes about the Driscoll accident. Could there be a maniac in Western Oil's computer department? Was he imagining things—jumping to crazy conclusions? Surely Old Harry's death was just one of those freaks of nature. And Joe Driscoll—Joe just fell off his ladder. Nothing mysterious about that.

HE DROVE TO THE older part of Springhill, parked outside the Driscoll house and hurried through the wrought-iron gateway, not even stopping to stare at the fence or the long-dead tulips lying pitifully under the

spot where Joe had met his death.

When Mrs. Driscoll answered his ring on the old-fashioned doorbell, he asked quickly, "Do you remember me, Mrs. Driscoll? I'm the reporter with the *Herald*. May I please come in?"

"Why, I guess so.. It's Mr. Kershaw, isn't it? You wrote such a nice story about Joe. Why do you want to see me now?" asked the widow.

"I'm not sure myself. I don't think I can even explain. It's—well, I have a theory about the way your husband died. It's just a crazy hunch and I don't mean to upset you, Mrs. Driscoll. I hope you'll trust me. I'd like to see Joe's desk. My theory may be all wrong, but would you just let me look at his desk?" begged Kershaw.

"Well, I guess it would be all right. Does this have anything to do with the insurance?" she questioned him suspiciously.

"No, nothing at all. I'll tell you later if I'm right, and if I'm wrong there'll be no harm done. Probably I am wrong, like I said, but something has stuck in my mind and I won't rest easy until I work it out."

She nodded sympathetically. "Like an unfinished puzzle. We hadn't really finished furnishing Joe's den. I've cleaned it up some. He loved this house but he wasn't the neatest man in

the world." She led Kershaw through a doorway arched over the fretwork.

The room she called "Joe's den" was dominated by a huge antique oak rolltop desk. Bookcases lined one wall and a horsehair sofa faced a marble-fronted fireplace.

As soon as Mrs. Driscoll rolled up the desk front, revealing its many pigeonholes and broad work space, Bill Kershaw saw what he had come to seek. An old-fashioned nail-spike spindle, the kind once used by newspaper editors to spike copy, stood to one side. Impaled on it was a computer card bearing the words *Western Oil Company*.

The theory that had been forming loosely in his thoughts crystallized, as Kershaw put out his hand and touched the card with one finger.

Mrs. Driscoll stood to one side, watching him. "That old spindle came with the desk when we bought it. Joe used to stick all our unpaid bills on it. You aren't supposed to make a hole in those cards, I know, but he liked to use it. Bills that needed attention right away he put on that old spindle so he'd see them first thing when he'd sit down to write checks."

Kershaw could scarcely speak. He mumbled his thanks to Mrs. Driscoll and fled the

house as fast as he could. He felt positive now that the three bizarre deaths were linked somehow by the computer cards of Western Oil. He tried to pull his racing thoughts together.

He didn't think his editor would believe him and he knew he wasn't ready to go to the police with a wild theory that the deaths of Joe Driscoll, Harry Benson and Cecily Durham had a common element.

He stopped at a liquor store and bought a fifth of Scotch and took a belt right out of the bottle as soon as he was in his car again. This seemed to clear his head a little and he stopped at the nearest phone booth, looking up and dialing the number of the Eureka Service Station at the end of Main Street, where he regularly had his own car serviced.

"This is Bill Kershaw. I have a credit account with you folks," he said when the phone was answered. "Your bills all come from your parent company, Western Oil. Could you tell me where the billing originates, where the computer actually is?" He drew out of his pocket his own last statement for a tune up, adding that the bills listed only a post office drawer number in Dallas, Texas.

Kershaw was given an address. He hung up and dialed

again, this time making a reservation on a single evening flight from Springhill to Dallas. Driving to his office, he told his editor that he had a lead to follow on a possible story. The *Herald's* editor, having great respect for his reporter's methods and intuition, did not question him.

Kershaw drove to his bachelor apartment, stopping long enough to throw a few things into a flight bag. He noticed almost absentmindedly a small pile of outgoing mail he'd left on his coffee table. Remembering that some of it was checks for bills almost overdue, he scooped up the envelopes as he left the apartment and dropped them in the mailbox just outside his building. He almost retrieved the one going to Western Oil, then, shrugging, let it slide along with the others into the mailbox. He drove straight to the airport, just making the flight.

Once in a Dallas motel room, he had second thoughts about the mental processes that had brought him thus far. He began to doubt his own instincts, which had always served him so well as a reporter. He tossed and turned most of the night. With daylight came a renewed determination to follow his hunch through, to satisfy himself once and for all as to

whether a real connection existed between Western Oil's computer system and the three bizarre deaths in recent weeks in Springhill.

IT WAS NINE O'CLOCK on a fine morning in late May when Kershaw presented himself at the ultra-modern complex housing the home office and computer center of Western Oil Company, a few miles outside Dallas.

He flashed a press card at the receptionist. "I'm a reporter with the *Herald*," he said, not pinpointing *which Herald*. "I've been assigned to get an interview with the man in charge of your computer system. I know I don't have an appointment, but I'd like to talk to him long enough to set up an interview."

Kershaw felt certain that if his nebulous theory was right, Western Oil had either a computer gone haywire or someone running it with diabolical vindictiveness.

With surprising ease, he was issued a pass and, after a frustrating wait, was introduced to a short plump man in a doctor's white suit.

Breaking into the receptionist's introduction, the man greeted him with, "You've no idea what a pleasure this is, Mr. Kershaw. You know, we now have the prototype of the

computer of the future. We were so fortunate to get the very first BJ-one hundred model and now we're ready for people, especially our customers around the world, to know we at Western Oil are blessed with the most advanced, efficient computerization in industry. Absolutely unique. Our BJ-one hundred practically thinks for herself. Well, you'll soon see for yourself."

Kershaw involuntarily shrank away from the little man gushing out his enthusiasm. He let himself be guided down the stark white hallways of Western Oil's antiseptically modern computer wing. He was quiet as his guide continued to pour out a stream of praise for his BJ-100, for Kershaw was wondering if this odd little man with his slightly effeminate speech and dimpled, plump fingers that gestured constantly as he talked, could be the answer to the puzzle of Springhill's mysterious deaths.

Could this computer scientist in some unholy manner have become so closely associated with his work that he had gone off the deep end? Kershaw knew it was not uncommon for scientists with certain psychological bents to grow to feel their own finite projects must be protected at any cost. This was what Kershaw had

come three hundred and fifty miles to find out. He had to solve the mystery, if indeed, he could determine that a mystery actually existed outside his own mind.

Stopping outside a doorway marked *Authorized Personnel Only*, Kershaw's guide turned to him and said, "Oh, I say, I do get carried away. I neglected to introduce myself back there. My name is Bob Gentry. The Bee Jay is my 'baby'.

"Your—'baby'?" queried Kershaw.

"I feel she's mine. I waited five years for her to be 'born', you know! She's my third computer and I helped design her. I've felt that all three computers were my children in a way. Brain children, you know. Computers aren't like other machines." Gentry's smile was paternal.

That smile frightened Kershaw. Everything about Gentry offended his masculinity. The smile somehow crowned the entire effect and convinced Kershaw that, if a madman was indeed killing people he believed to be mistreating his precious computer, his "baby", Gentry was his man. How murder hundreds of miles away had been manipulated he could not yet imagine, but he was more than ever convinced that somehow murder had been done.

Gentry opened the door, admitting Kershaw to the control area for Western Oil's computer BJ-100. Kershaw almost expected a formal introduction to Gentry's "baby". He found himself face to face with the computer console and a formidable bank of compartmented cabinets with tapes busily turning.

"It's huge," he said, eyeing BJ warily.

"Yes, indeed, and yet computers today are only one-tenth the size they were ten years ago. That may give you some idea of the enormity of our project here." Gentry warmed to his subject, delighting in Kershaw's interest and eager for the publicity to come.

"I can't tell you all our little secrets, Mr. Kershaw. And, of course, there isn't a great deal for you to see. But Bee Jay is practically running our entire corporation now. She not only handles millions of accounts for our subsidiaries, she tracks inventory, analyzes data, controls refineries around the country and much more. She's also tied in with dozens of other computers that pool information with us. But what makes Bee Jay unique and the first of her kind is that she represents a breakthrough in computer science."

Gentry's pink face was glowing with pride.

"What do you mean?" Kershaw asked.

"Ever since the very first computer began operating back in 1944 at Harvard University, scientists have dreamed of the day that a computer could learn from experience. Until Bee Jay, a computer was merely a servant, no better than its master. Bee Jay is the first computer that can think for herself! We have conquered countless problems, from a whole new type of magnetic tape to whittling transcribing down to nanoseconds, faster than the speed of light.

"With Bee Jay, we have finally been able to generate circuitry almost identical to human brain waves, modeled after man's own ability to reason and learn."

"What operates the computer?" asked Kershaw. "I mean, can you give me a rough idea of how she works?" Kershaw heard himself refer to the computer as a "she" and vowed not to fall into Gentry's personal vernacular again!

"She runs on a combination of solar batteries and conventional current. What should interest you, Kershaw, is that this central computer serves not only our corporation but is linked to other companies on this continent by phone lines. A small research organization

thousands of miles away can put a telephone on an input machine or date terminal and in a matter of seconds obtain needed information.

"We hope one day to be free of lines and transmit by laser beams. This would virtually eliminate power failures. Even today in a brownout, Bee Jay can gather strength from computers hooked into her or supply it, if needed. As for her thinking, she can arrange her own scheduling and concentrate, so to speak, on solving the most complex problems."

"Getting back to this breakthrough, who found a way for a computer to think for itself?" asked Kershaw.

"Well, I'm not being unduly immodest, I think, when I tell you that it was primarily my discovery. Oh, there were eighteen years of hard work, concentrated primarily on this one area of computer development. And this is why I stay with Bee Jay. She's so complex that we are finding multiple production is going to take more time than we imagined."

"Does this computer make many mistakes?" Kershaw asked the question with deliberation.

Gentry's face flushed red. "Mistakes? It's almost impossible. Even if the programmer makes an error or there is a

mechanical malfunction, Bee Jay can learn to correct it at once. You've evidently missed the point of what I've been telling you, Kershaw!

"Bee Jay is so sensitive she can analyze mistakes and learn from experience. I've told you—she is the *first* of her kind, the *Mother Eve* of all computers to come."

Gentry leaned forward and patted the computer's console. Kershaw shuddered.

"Suppose someone gets a bill that's wrong and sends back one of your computer cards folded up or with a hole punched in it in anger or—" Kershaw could not bring himself to say the word "mutilated". He *had* to know and yet dreaded to ask.

"That would be *intolerable*! Bee Jay is the most sensitive machine man has created." Gentry gave Kershaw a sharp look. "What are you getting at? You told me you want to do an article on the marvels of Bee Jay. You seem to be just looking for flaws."

IN HIS EAGERNESS to make Kershaw understand the scope of his "baby", Gentry drew close, his voice dropping to a low intimate note of confidence.

"She can be *fantastic*, Mr. Kershaw. She can replace all but a handful of personnel in

our corporation. When I'm alone with her here at night and the only sound in the building is her hum, I know there's something *uncanny* about Bee Jay.

"Oh, I know that sounds silly to *you*, especially when I know her inside out, like a surgeon. All the same, what my colleagues and I have done with Bee Jay is to create an all but human electronic brain. She's almost alive."

"Uncanny? Almost alive?" Kershaw half whispered to himself. "Yes!" And if Bee Jay could think and learn, she could gather all her electronic brain waves and use power through all those computers she was hooked up with to—what?

Bits of what he had read in science fiction and history tumbled through his mind. He thought of the men who had invented beyond their time and been condemned by their peers for devising diabolic machines. *Shades of Frankenstein*, he thought! *What was that old phrase? Infernal machines!*

"How far—how deep does Bee Jay's thinking go, Gentry?"

"Oh, it's hard to explain to someone like *you*, Mr. Kershaw," fluttered Gentry. "Bee Jay surprises us every day. The evaluations she makes of material we feed her is not unsimilar to rearranging molecules.

She rearranges thought processes."

"When does she do this?"

"Mostly at night, when she's finished her regular scheduling. That's when computers linked up around the world 'talk' together. I'm sure you've heard of this. People make jokes about it. But it's very serious business. They pool their resources to solve world problems. Now that we have Bee Jay, we are beginning to have "brain-storming" by computers."

"Why do you keep calling Bee Jay 'she'?" Kershaw threw it in suddenly, watching Gentry's face.

"She's—well, eccentric. Most machines are, you know. Temperamental. And they each have their little peculiarities. Don't you ever feel that way about cars? They're more than just steel and plastic. Machines develop personalities and Bee Jay's is definitely feminine."

"What kind of personality would you say Bee Jay has?" Kershaw asked, feeling drawn into a deadly whirlpool of conclusions he did not want to make.

"Disciplined, exacting, a stern woman—and determined to have her own way," said Gentry quietly.

"A will of her own," said Kershaw.

"Precisely. She's partly my

invention, but even I must handled her carefully." Gentry looked about cautiously. "You know, I would protect Bee Jay with my life, as I would my child, but I have to admit that sometimes she's—well, bitchy is the word."

Kershaw stared at the other man.

"Last week," Gentry went on in whispered tones, "she gave a near-fatal shock to one of the men working on her circuits when he was a bit rough."

As Gentry spoke, Kershaw was aware that Bee Jay's humming grew ominously louder, as if she had Gentry's chiding words. A spasm of pain passed over Gentry's face even as Kershaw had the thought.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing! Nothing at all," snapped Gentry.

"Gentry, if Bee Jay *can* think and learn and her processes are similar to brain waves, she must be able to think vindictively or kindly. And if she can direct these electronic thoughts toward the people who accounts she handles? What's to stop her feeling angry at—say—people who spindle her cards?"

"Now, Mr. Kershaw, be reasonable. Why should she do that?"

"You said she's sensitive, a sensitive, feminine electronic brain. Would her learning pro-

cess include learning to hate somebody who 'fed' a folded card to her?"

"Why, I—I don't know what to say! That sounds like you're getting into almost emotional reactions—"

"If a machine can think, it can surely react to abuse. You told me cards that are spindled or punched or whatever are an intolerable abuse to this computer."

"Kershaw, *why* are you here? Why are you asking this kind of question?"

"Gentry, back where I live, three people have died horribly. One was spindled, one had some sort of stroke and was folded and one was mutilated. That suggests something to do with the little phrase on the bottom of all those billing cards that come back to Bee Jay—*Do not fold, spindle or mutilate*, they all say in fine print at the bottom.

"All three of those people back home had credit cards with your company. Now that leads me to think that something or somebody is acting out hatred toward customers who have abused their cards. I found a card on a spindle at the scene of one death. Another man had folded one and the third victim had torn up a card. It wasn't the first time these three people had done this,

either, judging from the evidence I found."

"You're talking like a madman! I don't know *where* you live or *what's* happened in your home town. But to come here and accuse—get *out!*" Gentry's pink skin was an ugly purple and this time there was no mistaking the rising tone in the hum of the computer behind him.

"*Get out, I said!*" Gentry shrieked.

Kershaw turned on his heel and went. He was afraid now to marshal his thoughts anywhere near Gentry or the monstrous computer.

He walked as fast as he could without attracting attention, back to the entrance of the Western Oil building, half-expecting guards to jump him at any time. Once outside, he sprinted to his rented car. Heading back toward Dallas along the interstate freeway, he pulled off at the first service area and sat for a few minutes, trying to assimilate what he'd seen at the computer center with what he'd come to suspect.

When he felt he could make sense on the telephone, he went into a booth, deposited his dime and placed a collect call to his editor in Springhill.

"Jim? I've got the biggest story since flying saucers and it's just as fantastic."

"Kershaw, are you drunk?"

"Jim, maybe nobody will believe this but I've got to make somebody listen. Remember Joe Driscoll, Harry Benson and Cecily Durham? I *know* what killed them! It's a computer. A Frankenstein monster and they're going to build *more of them*," cried Kershaw.

"Bill, what the hell is going on down there?"

"Jim, *please!* It's the computer at Western Oil. There's never been one like it. It's got brain waves and it's got power, Jim—power to generate all over the country through other computers. That's *got* to be the answer! If a voodoo priest can *think* somebody dead, *think* what a computer with mental processes can do!"

"Bill, have you been out in that Texas sun all day?"

"Jim, for God's sake, *listen* to me! I *know* that computer can kill. It won't let anyone mutilate its cards twice. It—"

Kershaw felt a soaring pain deep in his brain and across his stomach. Slumping against the phone booth, he pleaded with his editor. "Jim—I can—*prove* it. Electronic evil—ultra sensitive—all circuits working together in one direction—brain waves duplicated. Oh, God help me! Yesterday—tore my card up—gass bill wrong. Must be in computer—now. Stop Bee—" "

Bill Kershaw screamed once, as he sank in a huddle on the floor of the phone booth.

In Dallas, telephone company technicians noted unusual electronic activity in a nearby relay station.

IN SPRINGHILL, the editor of the Herald sat stunned at his desk. Nothing Kershaw had said made sense. Still holding the phone, he shouted across the city desk for someone to have Chief Hallstrom put a tracer on Kershaw's call.

A few minutes later, the second phone on his desk rang. Answering, he heard the Chief's booming voice.

"Have you located Kershaw?" demanded the editor.

"No, but I wish to God we had him here with that intuition of his. We've got another weirdo. Guy just folded up and died like old Harry Benson. What the hell do you think is going on around this town?"

"I *think* Kershaw just told me."

At that moment, Bob Gentry sat at his desk. The disturbance that had momentarily overloaded circuits, burning contacts on switches, had subsided.

Gentry got up and walked over to the console after a few minutes. With deliberation he typed out the words, *Bee Jay, you've been a naughty girl!*

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JULY—1976

THE LONG SHADOW

by
**FRANK
BURY**



John and Nesta believed they had buried the past when they moved to Rymington. But the past refused to die.

JOHN TRANTER stood at the upstairs bedroom window of the cottage, staring down at the garden. He could see his wife Nesta down there, and their five-year-old son Simon. The boy was giggling happily as he swayed to and fro on the swing that his wife pushed.

Nesta was not laughing, though. She tried to smile for the boy's sake, but couldn't laugh now any more than her husband could. But even with this strained look on her face, his wife still looked beautiful, he thought. Her health and looks had improved so much since they moved to Rymington. How very different from how

she had looked when they let her out of Holloway jail.

Tranter stared at his own face in the dressing-table mirror. He certainly looked much fitter, more robust himself. Going straight had been the making of both of them. The town of Rymington had taken to them. And young Simon had been born here.

Oh yes, life at Rymington had been good, truly happy, more than a couple of excrooks deserved. But Maxwell had turned up—Vic Maxwell, the shabby little blackmailer—to form a long shadow that blotted out the sun of happiness. If only Maxwell would die!

Tranter knew that, whatever happened, he would never forget the day when Nesta first told him of the arrival of her brother, about the scourge that he brought with him.

Nesta had been in the meadows beyond the cottage gathering blackberries. The kid had got over a bout of whooping-cough. He was okay now really, a pretty tough kid with his mother's good looks.

"Yes, you go blackberrying." He had smiled at her fondly. "I would have come with you, only there's this meeting of the Cottage Hospital Management Committee."

He took his duties as a responsible Rymington citizen very seriously. Nesta, too, had become involved with local organisations.

The people of Rymington accepted them. They really *meant* something here...

Nesta had been in tears when she told her husband of the surprise visit from her brother, and of Vic Maxwell's blackmail demands.

"I never even knew Vic was out of jail. They must have cut his sentence quite a lot. Maybe because he's a sick man..."

"But how did he find us?"

"Oh, it's not difficult, if you've really made up your mind to find somebody."

"We were still blackberrying

out in the measows when he turned up," she said.

"I wish I'd been there," Tranter said, gritting his teeth.

"It wouldn't have helped," she told him anxiously. "If you'd hit him, it would only have made things worse."

"Young Simon didn't hear any of your conversation?"

"Well, of course not! I sent him off to play on his own for a while. He can't come to any harm in the meadows."

"I suppose your brother thinks we're stinking rich?"

"He knows we're not short of money."

Tranter ran a hand desperately through his hair. "The dirty little rat's going to get away with it, isn't he?"

Nesta was weeping softly into her spread hands. "Oh, if only he'd die!" she murmured.

"No such luck, darling."

"He looks thin, and yet he's got this urge to eat and drink... that's diabetes, isn't it?"

"Don't start building hopes, love—he could go on for years. Meanwhile he'll fleece us of every penny we've got..."

The words came pouring back into Tranter's mind.

"I'll be back... I'll just drop in when you least expect," her brother had said. "Have some cash ready for me, eh, Sis?"

Vic Maxwell turned up one

day while they were both out. Tranter was at his office in the town. Nesta had taken young Simon to the shopping center.

She had left the kitchen door key hanging in its usual secret place in the garden shed. Her brother Vic let himself in.

She found him in the house when she returned...

Some time later the telephone rang in Tranter's office.

"It's Nesta, darling. "I came home from the shops to find that Vic had let himself in with the kitchen key. He... he's dead, John."

There was a short silence, then Tranter said, "Oh God... you haven't...?"

"No!" She sounded almost too calm for the relief she must have felt. "I *found* him dead."

"You sent for a doctor, of course?"

"Oh yes! And then the police."

"The police?"

"Look, darling, I can't talk about this on the 'phone. Can you come quickly, please?"

"Of course!—at once!"

When he got home an inspector and a sergeant from the local C.I.D. were there. Nesta told him quietly, "The doctor says that my brother was poisoned."

"Poisoned?" Tranter stared at his wife's pale face. "Are they sure?"

"Yes, quite sure."

The police inspector glanced meaningfully towards young Simond, who was playing happily with a pullalong toy.

"Er—could I have a word with you alone, sir?"

"Yes, of course."

He took the inspector along to the lounge.

"I didn't want your youngster to hear what I have to say," the Inspector began.

Tranter said hesitantly, "You aren't accusing my wife of poisoning her brother?"

"No, no, no, sir—nothing like that! As a matter of fact, your small son poisoned him—only don't ever tell. We shant."

Tranter went on staring.

The Inspector went on. "Apparently Maxwell was always hungry—diabetic, it seems. He found a blackberry pie your wife had made, and ate most of it. That pie was poisoned."

"But how could my little boy...?"

"You know what kids are, sir. I asked him if he had picked some more blackberries of his own after Mummy sent him off to play alone. He said yes, he had, and showed me where he'd picked 'em."

"There's a lot of belladonna growing down there in the hedges, sir. That's what he picked—the deadly-nightshade berries. The kid was only trying to be useful, after all..."

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JULY, 1976

NOT JUST A NUMBER

by

JOHN LUTZ

Rev. Callahan did his best to keep ex-cons out of prison.

POLICE COMMISSIONER Lyle Brell was early, and not without reason. He took the long flight of steps to the renovated three story brownstone with the feigned vigor of a middle-aged man who fancies himself still in shape. Absently he brought up his right hand in purposely casual movement and smoothed his graying but full head of hair. Early as it was, there might be a stray camera or two here.

He rang the doorbell and waited. If there were a camera or two about, the tall brownstone building, converted



from a six-family apartment, offered a flattering backdrop. The hedges were neatly trimmed and the porch and window frames were freshly painted. In one of the worst sections of the city, the building shone like a testament to what could be done if only the residents cared. The most impressive thing was

that the ex-convicts had done all the work themselves.

Ben Wert, the notorious paroled safecracker, opened the door for him.

"Afternoon, Ben." The commissioner was careful to shake hands for the possible camera.

"Commissioner Brell! We weren't expecting you for a while." Wert was a sharp-eyed, grinning man who always appeared to need a shave.

"I thought it might be wise to drop by early," Brell said, "before the press and all the television boys show up."

"And I'd call that a sound idea, Commissioner." The voice belonged to Reverend Callahan, founder and manager of Care Halfway House. "It's no secret you're running for Congress later this year, as well you should. Can't blame you for wanting to see that things here go smoothly."

"It's not so much that, Reverend Callahan," Brell said, "as it would be good for Care Halfway House to make a favorable impression on the people of this city through the media. After all, you depend entirely on donations."

Reverend Callahan, a small, white-haired, blue-eyed man with an oft-broken nose, gave the beautiful smile that had evoked many a donation. He was a mail-order reverend, as

everyone knew, but no one cared. It was results that counted. "And your consideration is appreciated, Commissioner," he said, "as much as the generous check from Citizens Against Crime."

Citizens Against Crime had grown into a large organization in the past few years, its membership swelling with the city's rapidly rising crime rate. Reverend Callahan had spoken a few times at their meetings. Since the organization's donation was a sizable one, and since the commissioner *did* intend to run for Congress, and since such donations were the lifeblood of Care Halfway House, it had been decided that it would be advantageous for all concerned if Commissioner Brell would present Reverend Callahan with the check in a ceremony before the press and TV cameras.

"What you've accomplished here is both useful and impressive," the commissioner was saying. "These 'halfway houses' to help ex-convicts adjust to their freedom and stay out of prison are nothing new, but I'd feel safe in saying that yours is the most successful such venture in the country." *And if it helps drop the crime rate, the commissioner added to himself, it will help me to become a Congressman.*

Callahan beamed. "An exaggeration, Commissioner, but it makes me proud nonetheless."

"You *should* be proud," said the fat, red-faced man who had slipped through the still-open door.

"If it isn't Murphy of *The Times*," Callahan said with a warm smile.

"Would you put your arm around the reverend?" Murphy asked Brell, readying his camera.

"Proud to," the commissioner said, as his arm snaked about Callahan's shoulders and his teeth flashed.

There would be no time now to make sure things went perfectly, the commissioner thought, but it probably didn't matter anyway. The check presentation should still result in plenty of votes.

The rest of the press was arriving now in droves, fifteen minutes early to get the candid, human side of things as the enterprising Murphy had done. A microphone was thrust before the commissioner's face.

"How would you sum up the success of Care Halfway House?" the reporter asked.

"What Reverend Callahan has accomplished here is both useful and impressive," the commissioner said, smiling. "I'd feel safe in saying that it's the

most successful such venture in the country."

"Do you plan to toss your hat in the ring for Congressman later this year, sir?"

"At this point, no. But the future is uncharted territory to us all, Tom."

The reporter seemed flattered that the commissioner knew his name. Commissioner Brell kept up on such things.

Another microphone, and a TV mini-camera from Channel Seven Eyespot news.

"Commissioner, could you tell me the significance of this donation?"

"Our alarming crime statistics are a matter that should concern us all, Bill, and while organizations like Citizens Against Crime are alerting people to that fact, establishments like Care Halfway House are doing their share on the front lines, so to speak."

"Do you intend to run for Congress, Commissioner?"

"There is a bridge—"

"I think they want us outside," Reverend Callahan said. "Mrs. Dunhaker has arrived with the check."

Indeed, on the front porch of the neatly trimmed brownstone, stood the redoubtable stout form of Mrs. Irene Dunhaker, president of Citizens Against Crime. Several reporters were talking with her while a knot

of neighborhood people and a few minor city officials gathered at the base of the steps. A microphone had been set up, Commissioner Brell saw, as he and Reverend Callahan stepped outside. Television cameras from all the major channels were on hand.

Both Reverend Callahan and the commissioner shook hands with the smiling Mrs. Dunhaker for the press, then the commissioner stepped nimbly to the microphone.

"It's all there in the statistics," he said, when at last he got to the point. "In this age of 'revolving door' courts and prisons, we have here an example of what can be done to help sincere men regain their honesty and self-respect—for their own good and the good of the community. In the past four years a mere six percent of the ex-residents of Care Halfway House have been arrested for a serious offence. And this during a period when our city's crime rate has risen forty-eight percent!

"Some of the men who've passed through this building I have known personally as habitual criminals and thought to be incorrigible. I'm happy to say that Reverend Callahan has proved me wrong! The once-familiar names no longer show up on the police blotters,

in the statistics. I can think of no better place for the earnestly donated funds of Citizens Against Crime." With an elaborate gesture Mrs. Dunhaker handed the commissioner the \$5,000 check. Without looking down at it, the commissioner passed it on to Reverend Callahan.

"I'm pleased," Reverend Callahan said, stepping to the microphone and smiling his beautiful smile. Flashbulbs popped. "Pleased for myself and for my boys . . . the fellas who have succeeded against odds that had overwhelmed them before. I'm happy for all of us . . . and all of us thank you." He kissed the smiling Mrs. Dunhaker on the cheek and shook hands with the smiling commissioner. Flashbulbs popped again. End of presentation . . .

FROM A THIRD floor window Reverend Callahan looked down at Commissioner Brell's taxpayer-purchased sedan as it slowed briefly for the corner stop sign, then made a left turn. Members of the press and Mrs. Dunhaker had likewise departed. A few area residents stood below, enjoying the sunshine and chatting. Then, still talking, they began to walk slowly toward the corner.

Reverend Callahan turned away from the window, toward

Willie Clark, a short, sad-faced man who had recently been released from an eight to ten year sentence for bank robbery. Despite his plea of not guilty, there had been little doubt of his guilt—no doubt at all in the minds of the jury—as he had been surprised inside the bank's vault after closing time. He was the latest to be recommended to Care Halfway House.

"I'd like you to meet Ben Wert," Reverend Callahan said, nodding toward where the ex-safecracker sat in a corner with his legs propped up on a footstool. "He's something of an expert in your field and a member of our guidance staff."

"I know him by reputation," Clark said warmly.

"Then I'm sure you'll listen to what he has to say and accept his help."

"You got caught on that bank

job because you used too much explosive on the safe and somebody on the street heard," Wert said with something like condescension. "And you left a window open where you'd shorted the alarm and entered. What you'll learn here is not only everything about safe-cracking, but about breaking and entering as well.

"A good safe man needs some of the skills of a good house-breaker. Another staff member will instruct you in that." Wert let his legs drop from the footstool and sat up straight. "You've got to listen close here, Clark. We teach you everything you need to know, but then it's up to you."

"What he's saying," Reverend Callahan said with a reassuring smile, "is that when you leave here, we don't want you to become the wrong kind of statistic."

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PERMISSION TO MURDER

by
**HERBERT
HARRIS**



Laurence Rowthall was immune to the law—but he was not proof against vengeance.

IT WAS FOUR YEARS since I had seen Tom Harbison, and it was enjoyable to be visiting his bachelor-flat and renewing the old friendship.

"Now you're back from Australia," Tom said, going to the cocktail-cabinet to pour us some drinks, "we must see more of each other and recapture a bit of the old days."

I agreed enthusiastically as I wandered about the flat's living-room, thinking how well he had furnished it for a man

with no woman in his life. Coming suddenly upon the framed portrait of Joyce was something of a shock.

As a boy, I had played with Tom and Joyce Harbison in South London. Later, as we grew up together, I had fallen in love with Joyce. It had been a bitter disappointment to Tom when his younger sister rejected me for someone else.

When he brought the drinks, Tom saw that I was still looking at his sister's photograph.

His round face, in keeping with his huge lumbering body, suddenly lost its jovial smile.

"I suppose you knew Joyce was dead?" he asked quietly.

"Dead?"

"It happened about two years ago. Laurence murdered her."

There was sudden oppressive silence in the room. I could hear the faint rumble of traffic in the street below.

When Joyce turned me down in favour of Laurence Rowthall, Tom had done his damnedest to talk her out of it.

"She'll never know happiness with that fellow," he had said to me. "You've only got to look at him."

That had been a slight exaggeration, really. A lot of quite decent chaps looked like Laurence.

"I know he can't help the unhappy home life he had as a boy," Tom had said, "but it's made him permanently introspective—a neurotic. Joyce thinks she'll be able to change him, but she won't."

One might have been prepared to argue with Tom about that, but I didn't. Joyce had chosen, and I didn't despise her for it. I even gave her my blessing.

"Here," Tom said, thrusting the whisky into my hand. "Drink this. You look quite shaken."

"I was fond of your sister."

"Yes, I know. Everybody was fond of Joyce . . . except her husband. That's what he loathed about her. So he strangled her."

The great gulp of whisky I had taken was burning my throat. "What happened to him? Did they hang him?"

"Oh, no. They set him free." Tom's mouth twisted in a mockery of a smile. "You see, it was all right for Laurence to murder. Nature had given him permission."

"I don't understand."

"I mean that Laurence realized his affliction was a cast-iron safeguard. He had a *carte blanche* to kill."

I tried to remember what Laurence's affliction had been, but perhaps I had never known it.

"I expect you didn't know that ever since he was a kid Laurence had walked in his sleep?"

I shook my head. "No, Joyce never said anything about that."

"Well, he had an older sister . . . Julia. And one night Julia woke up, screaming the place down. You see, Laurence had his hands round her throat. He was walking in his sleep. He was sixteen at the time."

"Oh, the psychiatrists had the usual smooth explanations

for it. To start with, there was his unhappy background.

"His mother was promiscuous, they said, and had deserted his father for some other man. The boy had 'subconscious tendencies towards violence'. Just couple this with a hate for the opposite sex—fostered by his mother's unfaithfulness—and there you are. All very simple!"

"Did Joyce know all about this?"

"Oh, yes, she knew all right. But she was quite convinced he had grown out of all that. "Perhaps in the early part of her married life she was happy enough—I could never be certain about that. She did tell me once that Laurence had started his sleepwalking again, and she must have told others about it, too, perhaps to save any embarrassment it might cause.

"Well, remembering what had happened to his sister Julia, I began to worry in earnest about Joyce. I was really anxious after calling on her one day and noticing a livid purple bruise on her face. She told me she had slipped on a too highly-polished floor and hit her face on the edge of the table.

Tom dragged one of his hands across his eyes, and I waited for him to go on, feeling sorry for him.

"In the early hours of the

morning, two years ago, he strangled her as she lay in bed."

I winced slightly and closed my eyes.

"They didn't have to look for Laurence. He had gone straight to the police-station, whimpering and blubbering like a lost child and crying, 'I killed her . . . my darling little wife . . . I killed her . . . and I didn't even know I was doing it.'

"The whole sad story of Laurence Rowthall was laid bare. His doctor and a well-known psychiatrist spoke with conviction of his tragic sleep-walking, and his sister Julia told of what had happened before . . .

"Laurence had never been one to attract sympathy or popularity. And yet now, miraculously, he seemed able to do so. A most tragic accident, everyone said—even the jury. And for a time, even I wondered if it could possibly have been accidental."

I looked up from my drink. "Well, was it?"

Tom slowly shook his head.

"I watched him, you see. After those sloppy sentimentalists had sent him out into the world again. I went on watching him.

"With Joyce finally out of the way, he was happy. He spent a lot of time with a French

girl—some model—and I wondered how long he had known her before Joyce was out of the way. There was no doubt in my mind that Laurence was as normal as you or I!"

"You mean . . . he deliberately resumed the sleepwalking as a build-up to committing the murder?"

"What do *you* think?"

"And where is he now?" I asked.

He took a gulp of scotch and continued: "Just about a year

ago, he took a cottage on the cliffs down in Cornwall.

"One night he walked in his sleep. They found his body, still in pyjamas, smashed to bits on the rocks next morning. He had walked straight off the cliff and fallen two hundred feet."

"I was down there when it happened," Tom said quietly, and there was a slight twist to his mouth again. "You see . . . I had rented a small cottage only a few yards from *his* . . . Let's have another drink, shall we?"



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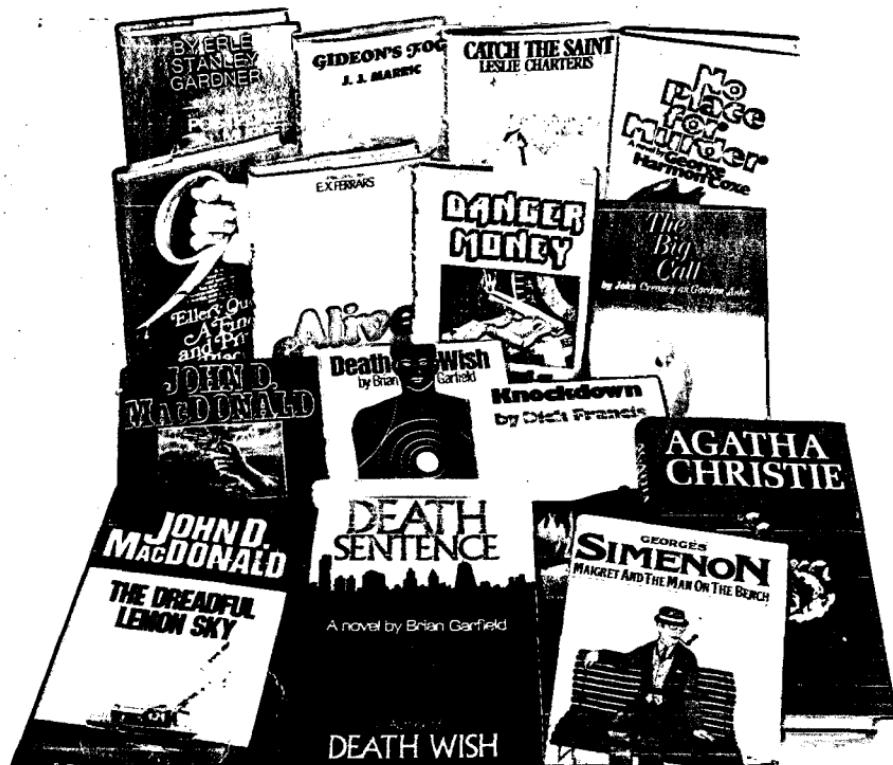
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